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*Impacts of Brexit on the transnational European
identities of university-educated Polish migrants in
London and Glasgow*

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Abstract

Early literature on post-accession migration from the ‘Accession Eight’ members of the European Union (EU) characterised it as ‘liquid’, emphasising the newfound flexibility of the EU’s free movement policy. However, later research has stressed the importance of ‘anchoring’ oneself in a host country to achieve security and stability. When the United Kingdom (UK) voted to leave the EU in 2016, Polish citizens in the UK were led to reflect on their identities, making the uncertain Brexit process a ‘critical event’ in their identity construction. After the UK’s departure from the EU was finalised, no studies appear to exist on the relationship between Brexit and UK-based Polish citizens’ ‘European’ identities, despite the fact that EU free movement is often believed to foster this identity. Based on semi-structured interviews with 16 Polish university graduates in London and Glasgow who emigrated from Poland after 2004, this thesis therefore investigates indicators of a European identity among participants and attempts to understand if and how Brexit has redefined these. In-depth inductive analysis reveals unexpected insights: those who moved to the UK with their families as children were more likely to identify with Europe than those who moved more recently as adults, despite the fact that the latter group exhibited more transnational behaviours. It appears that their ‘anchoredness’ in the UK and lack of connection to Poland, combined with the impact of Brexit on their sense of belonging and inclusion in the UK, led them to reflect on their identity and view Europe as an identity they could fall back on. This may have implications for civic engagement, civic unity, and other aspects of belonging.

Keywords

Brexit, migration, mobility, European identity, transnationalism, liquid migration, social anchoring, east-west migration, Poland, United Kingdom

Streszczenie

Wczesna literatura na temat migracji poakcesyjnej z państw A8 Unii Europejskiej (UE) charakteryzowała ją jako “płynną”, podkreślając nowo odkrytą elastyczność unijnej polityki swobodnego przemieszczania się. Późniejsze badania podkreśliły jednak znaczenie “zakotwiczenia się” w kraju przyjmującym w celu osiągnięcia bezpieczeństwa i stabilności. Kiedy Wielka Brytania zgłosiła za opuszczeniem UE w 2016 r., polscy obywatele w Wielkiej Brytanii zostali zmuszeni do refleksji nad swoją tożsamością, czyniąc niepewny proces Brexitu “krytycznym wydarzeniem” w budowaniu ich tożsamości. Po sfinalizowaniu opuszczenia UE przez Wielką Brytanię wydaje się, że nie istnieją żadne badania dotyczące związku między Brexitem a “europejską” tożsamością polskich obywateli mieszkających w Wielkiej Brytanii, mimo powszechnego przekonania, że swobodny przepływ osób w UE sprzyja tej tożsamości. Bazując na częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadach z 16 absolwentami uniwersytetów w Londynie i Glasgow, którzy wyemigrowali z Polski po 2004 roku, niniejsza praca magisterska bada wskaźniki tożsamości europejskiej wśród uczestników i próbuje zanalizować czy i w jaki sposób Brexit je przeddefiniował. Pogłębiona analiza indukcyjna ujawniła nieoczekiwane spostrzeżenia: osoby, które przeprowadziły się do Wielkiej Brytanii ze swoimi rodzinami jako dzieci, częściej identyfikowały się z Europą niż osoby, które przeprowadziły się niedawno jako dorośli, mimo że druga grupa wykazywała więcej zachowań transnarodowych. Wydaje się, że ich “zakotwiczenie” w Wielkiej Brytanii i brak związku z Polską, w połączeniu z wpływem Brexitu na ich poczucie przynależności i integracji w Wielkiej Brytanii, skłoniły ich do refleksji nad swoją tożsamością i postrzegania Europy jako tożsamości, na której mogliby się oprzeć. Może to mieć wpływ na zaangażowanie obywatelskie, jedność obywatelską i inne aspekty przynależności.

Słowa kluczowe

Brexit, migracja, mobilność, tożsamość europejska, transnarodowość, płynna migracja, społeczne zakotwiczenie, migracja wschód-zachód, Polska, Wielka Brytania

“There’s definitely a feeling that you don’t belong here as much as you did.”

Wiktoria, interview participant

“I don’t feel like I belong in Poland, and I don’t feel like I necessarily can belong here entirely, so that European identity is kind of what’s left.”

Paulina, interview participant

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List of acronyms

A8	Accession Eight: <i>of the EU10 (below), the eight states from CEE</i>
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe(an)
CEERE	Central and Eastern Europe(an), Russia(n) and Eurasia(n)
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
EU	European Union
EUSS	European Union Settlement Scheme (United Kingdom)
EU10	<i>The ten countries that joined the EU in 2004</i>
EU15	<i>The fifteen member states that were part of the EU prior to 2004</i>
GDP	Gross domestic product
HMRC	His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (United Kingdom)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ONS	Office for National Statistics (United Kingdom)
UK	United Kingdom

1. Introduction

Polish citizens in the UK have received substantial attention within migration studies research, primarily following the EU's 2004 eastern enlargement (White 2016). Though Polish emigration “was already an important socio-economic phenomenon” in the 1980s and 1990s, the “large increase” in migrants settling in the UK after 2004 (when the country immediately opened its labour market) exceeded expectations (Kaczmarczyk 2012, p. 168). Early research on intra-EU A8 migrants characterised them as “regional ‘free movers’”, “easy transnationals”, and “liquid” migrants (Favell 2008; Ryan, Klekowski von Koppenfels and Mulholland 2015; Engbersen and Snel 2013), emphasising the newly available flexibility for them to relocate within Europe and maximise study, career and financial opportunities (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020). Later research challenged such concepts, noting the need for “socio-psychological stability and security”, which the migration process risks disrupting without acquiring “crucial footholds and points of reference”, including language, secure residence and social connections — a process coined as “anchoring” (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018, p. 253). Moreover, vulnerable migrants, including those in insecure work or with a lower level of education, may face additional obstacles when it comes to ‘liquid’ migration (Guma and Dafydd-Jones 2019).

After the British electorate voted to leave the EU in 2016, Poles in the UK were led to “reflect on their multiple identities and loyalties”, making it a “critical event” in the ongoing process of their identity construction (White and Goodwin 2021, p. 410). During the uncertain Brexit process, which ended with the transition period's conclusion on 31 December 2020, there was a pressing need for research on its immediate impact on EU citizens' feelings of inclusion and decisions to stay or return to their origin countries, for which an extensive literature now exists (McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017; Czubińska *et al.* 2018; Guma and Dafydd-Jones 2019; Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020; Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska 2020). However, almost three years have passed since the transition period ended: alongside

the broad return of international travel to its pre-COVID-19 state, this makes the topic worth revisiting, with the UK now a decidedly post-EU state. This also facilitates a greater focus today on broader questions about Brexit's long-term identity-related effects.

No post-Brexit studies appear to exist on the relationship between Brexit and UK-based Poles' 'European identities', yet EU membership has been framed as an essential part of many CEE states' post-communist identity-building processes. Szczerbiak (2021, p. 256) argues that membership was frequently presented as a 'return' to the states' natural position in European 'civilisation', captured in the Czech anti-communist opposition movement's 1990 election slogan, 'Return to Europe', which was recycled in the region's respective accession referendums. The free movement rights afforded by EU membership in particular may have provided avenues for building a 'European' identity (Rother and Nebe 2009), and more than one million Polish citizens exercised these rights to emigrate the country within three years of EU accession (Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, p. 132). However, those most likely to exhibit a 'European' identity are also those most able to engage in more 'liquid' patterns of migration: young, highly-educated migrants with advanced language skills who lack strong family obligations (Rother and Nebe 2009; Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020). This thesis therefore looks at first-generation post-accession Polish migrants to the UK with a university level of education, seeking to investigate whether they exhibit indicators of a 'European' identity, and how Brexit may have affected these. This is summarised in the following research questions:

In what ways has Brexit impacted the transnational European identities of Polish university graduates who moved to the UK after 2004?

Do Polish university graduates who exercised free movement to relocate to the UK identify strongly with Europe?

Based on semi-structured interview data from 16 Polish university graduates living in the ethnically and culturally diverse cities of London and Glasgow, indicative answers to these questions were sought. Qualitative content analysis of the interviews was guided by a grounded

theoretical perspective, and the process was assisted by NVivo to identify key themes. This allowed participants' narratives to guide the findings whilst contextualising them in their broader socio-political and theoretical context.

The participants can nearly all be understood as leading a “transnational way of life” (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 129). Some had advanced abilities in three or more languages, and many spoke of friends and family living across Europe and beyond. Around half had engaged in Erasmus+ or comparable international exchanges. The main distinction that emerged was therefore whether they had moved to the UK more recently and by themselves, or whether they had lived in the UK for the majority of their lives and moved with family, with some overlap between these (i.e., recently but with family, or independently but several years ago).

Participants who were more ‘anchored’ to the UK were more likely to identify as European: these were mostly those who moved with their families as young children, counteracting the expectation that greater ‘liquidity’ in terms of lifestyle and aspirations would be an indicator of a stronger ‘European’ identity. This appeared to be linked to how the process of adapting to and settling in the UK before 2016 enabled a stable period of identity formation without the requirement for British citizenship or any complex administrative processes, meaning there was previously little conflict between a Polish identity and a long-term UK residence. After (1) the British electorate voted to leave the EU, often perceived as a vote against immigration (UKICE 2023), (2) their Polish citizenship ceased to provide the legal basis of their UK residence, and (3) a degree of detachment from Poland had occurred, a broad ‘European’ identity became something these participants could fall back on. This may illustrate a connection between the effects felt by Brexit and an individual’s identification with Europe among UK-based EU citizens, which further research could help to draw out.

1.1. Thesis outline

The thesis first critically analyses existing literature on key topics and the main concepts of transnationalism, liquid migration, anchoring, and ‘European identity’, and provides a brief history of Polish migration to the UK. Context is provided about the popular understanding of the EU referendum as a referendum on migration, and the details of the post-Brexit immigration system are summarised. Existing empirical research is then analysed on the effects of Brexit among UK-based EU citizens, reflecting on their decision-making and feelings of belonging.

After detailing the methodology, the analysis chapter outlines the main findings before offering an in-depth analysis. The chapter is divided into three main sections and their subsections, based on the main themes of the participants’ narratives, which are: (1) participants’ anxieties after the referendum; (2) indicators of transnationalism and Europeanness from participants’ narratives; and (3) indications of change that appear to have emerged due to Brexit. Lastly, the main findings are presented and avenues for further research are proposed.

2. Literature and concepts: Liquidity, anchoring, and ‘critical events’

2.1. Conceptualising migration

Haas, Castles and Miller (2020) characterise the post-war era, particularly the present day, as an *Age of Migration*, asserting that “migration is an intrinsic — and therefore inevitable — part of broader processes of global change and development” (p. 15). According to the IOM, there were approximately 281 million international migrants globally in 2020 — 128 million more than in 1990 and more than three times the estimated figure in 1970 (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021, p. 23).

Government attempts to control migration are often counterproductive; thus, its inevitability can be partially explained by state-centric approaches. As Hampshire (2013, pp. 2–3) argues, immigration policy has an “intractable nature”, which is “a reflection of contradictory imperatives of the liberal state”: while nationhood and representative democracy drive a restrictive policy approach, constitutionalism and capitalism provide incentives for more open borders. For all modern states, it is the fixed borders and citizenship model that make migration a meaningful and contentious concept at all (Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, p. 23). However, migration long precedes modern statehood: the process of migrating between residences first became theoretically possible in the Neolithic period, when agrarianism led formerly nomadic populations to settle permanently, a process known as *sedentarisation* (Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, p. 23).

Silvey (2004, p. 5) argues that migrants are not “disembodied actors responding rationally to economic forces, [...] or acting in response to the political-economic structures organizing their mobility”. Feminist theory supports her claim that “embodied experiences” define the “human agency” central to migrants’ decision-making (p. 5), illustrating the value of migrant-centric discussions focused on the implications of individual narratives.

The term ‘migrant’ is generally defined very loosely. Haas, Castles and Miller (2020, p. 25) define a migrant as “a person who is living in another country, state, province, or municipality than where she or he was born”, yet being born in a country does not always mean a person has citizenship there. If a person was born in the United Arab Emirates but they were raised, hold citizenship and still live in Egypt, few would claim this makes them a migrant. However, the inclusion of provinces and municipalities is a reminder that states have restricted internal migration to varying extents throughout history — including Prussia, China and the former Soviet Union (Torpey 2007). At the same time, freedom of movement can apply for international travel, most notably in the EU: thus, it is possible for the implications of international migration to be less significant than internal mobility.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a migrant as “[a] person who moves temporarily or seasonally from place to place” (OED 2023); the word ‘place’ here is extremely broad, and a migrant can clearly live somewhere permanently, not only “temporarily or seasonally”. The IOM (2019, pp. 132–133) defines a migrant as “a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently”. This understanding serves the needs of this thesis, but a greater emphasis is placed on crossing international borders, and on some kind of long-term settlement (whether understood as “permanent” or not).

2.2. Polish migration to the UK: A brief history

Emigration has a long history in Poland. Burrell (2009, pp. 2–6) notes that “outward migration has been a significant feature of the country’s development in the modern era”: the partitions of Poland, World War II, and the collapse of communism are widely acknowledged as catalysts of considerable increases in emigration.

As Sword (1996, p. 19) writes, those emigrating from Poland during the partitions arrived in England in search of refuge, first from religious persecution, then from political repression. The “harsh policies” of Prussia and Russia led to a “trickle of asylum-seekers arriving in England throughout the nineteenth century” only in the hundreds (pp. 19–21). The period during and after World War II saw numbers exceed 150,000, with the Polish government-in-exile operating out of London from 1940 (pp. 26–29). Under communist rule, Sword marks the introduction of martial law in 1981 as a significant outflow event. Sources indicate that “in the period 1980-9 some 1,050,000 Poles emigrated”, but most did not settle in the UK (pp. 49–50). The final collapse of communism saw only modest numbers emigrate, but Poland’s new regime viewed it as important to maintain links with diaspora communities, with London proving one of the more “difficult [...] communities to deal with”: “London had been for so long the seat of exile politics”, thus “[h]ostility and suspicion towards Warsaw agencies had become endemic in the fabric of organized Polish life in Britain” (p. 60). At the time of writing his ethnography, Sword (1996, p. 233) concluded that, twenty years on, “organised Polish communities of any viability” would only exist in “London and a handful of provincial metropolitan centres”. This was invalidated by the EU’s transformative eastern enlargement.

On 1 May 2004, the EU undertook its largest enlargement in terms of both people and member states, with ten new countries joining, primarily from CEE (Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, p. 132). While most EU15 states attempted to restrict migration from the EU10 for a transitional period of up to seven years, the UK, Ireland and Sweden did not; between May 2004 and April 2007, one million citizens left Poland, the most populous new member state, and most settled in the UK (Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, p. 132). Kaczmarczyk (2012, p. 167) notes that emigration from Poland did not erupt from nowhere in 2004: it was already “an important socio-economic phenomenon in Poland” in the 1990s, with almost one million Polish citizens living abroad, and annual net emigration steadily increasing from 2000. What is

striking, however, is “the large increase in the number of migrants to the UK and Ireland”, both of which immediately opened their labour markets to the new EU citizens, leading to “clear domination of the UK as most important destination in 2006 and 2007” (Kaczmarczyk 2012, p. 168).

2.3. Transnationalism, ‘liquid migration’ and ‘anchoring’ after 2004

Theories around transnationalism gained popularity during the 1990s and 2000s amidst increasing globalisation, particularly with the end of the Cold War and rapid advancements in digital communication (Kearney 1995; Vertovec 1999; Vertovec 2001). As Vertovec (2001, pp. 574–575) writes, research on migration has “almost always recognised that migrants maintain various forms of contact with people and institutions in their places of origin”, yet

[n]ewer, cheaper, and more efficient modes of communication and transportation allow migrants to maintain transnationally — effectively both ‘here’ and ‘there’ — their originally home-based relationships and interests.

This has various implications, including economic (via remittances), socio-cultural and political (p. 575), though most relevant to this thesis is the “portability of national identity” (Sassen 1998, cited in Vertovec 2001, p. 575). This can lead to “overlapping membership in political communities” which has implications for belonging and integration, both politically and socially (Vertovec 2001, p. 575). Capturing the ways in which transnationalism extends beyond ease of migration and communication and towards identity, Çağlar (2001, p. 610) claims that migrants who embody transnationalism “weave their collective identities out of multiple affiliations and positionings”, exhibiting “multiple allegiances to issues, peoples, places and traditions beyond the boundaries of their resident nation-states”.

With the integration of CEE countries into the EU at the beginning of this century, such forms of transnationalism theoretically became easier for many Central and Eastern Europeans. Favell (2008) argues that the EU’s eastern enlargements in 2004 and 2007 were far more

significant for migration and demographic change in Europe than the collapse of communism. Favell (2008, p. 703) thus characterises CEE migrants in Europe as “regional ‘free movers’” and “*not* immigrants”, since “with the borders open, they are more likely to engage in temporary and circular transnational mobility, governed by the ebb and flow of economic demand, than by long-term permanent immigration and asylum-seeking”. This somewhat hyperbolic claim emphasises the radical change in migration patterns that several scholars believed would be brought about by EU enlargement, since it became theoretically possible for intra-EU movement to more closely resemble intra-state mobility than international migration.

Post-accession CEE migrants have similarly been described as “easy transnationals”, and “circular” and “liquid” migrants (Ryan, Klekowski von Koppenfels and Mulholland 2015; Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020; Engbersen and Snel 2013). Such concepts emphasise the flexibility offered to EU citizens to relocate with ease and return when needed, particularly economic migrants from CEE for whom the process may be more profitable than settling more permanently in a Western European labour market (Engbersen and Snel 2013, p. 24). Meanwhile, career migration may also be easier, in which universities, government institutions and international corporations encourage migrants to “maximise opportunities” by relocating to the most beneficial EU states at a given time (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 129).

Engbersen and Snel (2013) draw from Moch’s (1992, cited in Engbersen and Snel 2013, pp. 21–22) categorisation of over three centuries of Western European migration into four key groups — local, circular, chain and career migration. They then argue that east-west intra-EU mobility fits an entirely “new” model: “liquid migration” (Engbersen and Snel 2013, pp. 23–24). With “‘thick’ and stable social institutions (class, family, labour, community, neighbourhood and nation-state) [...] being replaced by flexible, ‘thin’ institutions [...], together with advanced communications technologies and the disappearance of internal borders due to EU enlargement”, they suggest European migration has become more unpredictable,

with the post-2004 scale of migration from Poland to the UK, in particular, surpassing expectations (p. 31). They define liquid migration as “temporar[y]” and “invisib[le]”, associating it with labour migration and student migration (p. 33). They also emphasise that it is regular migration with legal residential status, that it is “unpredictable”, and that it is “much more individualised”, enabled by “looser and more fragile” family ties and the “postpone[ment of] marriage and having children to a later age” (p. 34).

Always having the option to return is thus considered a feature of the ‘new migration’ that east-west intra-EU mobility is often categorised as (Engbersen and Snel 2013; Vertovec 2007). Recent research has challenged such concepts, however, leading to disputes around the conceptual distinction between mobility and migration within the EU (Franceschelli 2022). Scholars have emphasised that, though “legally unconstrained”, the “search for anchored [...] lives” encourages migrants to engage in longer-term settlement (Franceschelli 2022, p. 772). Grzymała-Kazłowska (2018, p. 253) defines social anchoring as “the process of searching for footholds that allow individuals to acquire socio-psychological stability and security and function effectively in a new or substantially changed life environment”. She argues that “in the face of new life settings, individuals try to find crucial footholds and points of reference which enable them to meet their need for security, adapt to new life settings and feel ‘settled down’” (p. 253). As McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni (2017, p. 2109) note, “sustained research on Polish migrants has increasingly emphasised emergent desires of achieving a ‘normal’ life, alongside strengthening reasons for and signs of more permanent settlement”. The need for security and stability thus emphasises that relocating to a new country is expensive, mentally taxing, and often inaccessible — regardless of legal status (Engbersen and Snel 2013, p. 34).

The concept of anchoring helps to illustrate elements of class blindness evident in theories such as “liquid migration”. Engbersen and Snel (2013, p. 24) argue that career migration is becoming “more important” for CEE migrants, “attracted by universities [...]

governmental institutions like the EU and by health care institutions and international corporations”. However, as Kay and Trevena (2019, p. 162) note, most post-2004 CEE arrivals in the UK took up “low-paid and often precarious jobs [...] for which they [were] significantly overqualified”. This can lead to feelings of entrapment in low-skilled jobs and can contribute to workplace segregation and “wider forms of social isolation from the native population” (p. 165), making it hard to attain the status of some kind of elite ‘free mover’ (Favell 2008) or ‘liquid migrant’ (Engbersen and Snel 2013). Consequently, I acknowledge the diverse experiences and profiles of EU migrants in the UK and that the chosen demographic in this thesis is relatively more privileged, which their narratives are likely to reflect.

2.4. EU accession, a ‘European identity’, and free movement

Once communism ended across the CEERE region, CEE states began integrating into the Euro-Atlantic space. Between 1989-2004 in CEE EU candidate states, Szczerbiak (2021) notes “an overwhelming elite and public consensus in favour of EU membership” (p. 254), arguing that the process of accession was cast throughout the region “as a natural historical-civilisational choice” (p. 256). This was “encapsulated in the 1990 election slogan of the Czech Civic Forum anti-communist opposition movement, ‘Return(ing) to Europe’”, which framed the “symbolic reuniting of the Eastern and Western halves of the continent” as part of “the logic of history” (p. 256). This, he argues, “more than any other single factor, probably explained why these countries voted so overwhelmingly to join the EU in their 2003 EU accession referendums” (p. 256). This framing of EU membership as the ‘return’ to CEE states’ ‘natural’ position in European ‘civilisation’ provides a useful framework in which to consider the association between the EU and feelings of a ‘European identity’ for Poles inside and outside of Poland. Today, Polish citizens are among the most likely of the 27 EU member states to identify as ‘European’ (European Commission 2021, p. 74).

The meaning of a ‘European identity’, however, is highly contested. Even ‘identity’ is a loaded term, “elusive” and “problematic”, yet often seen as “indispensable” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 8). I take identity not to mean the constructivist hidden essence of an individual, but as “part of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from his [sic] knowledge of his [sic] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1981, p. 255).

The ‘European identity’ is largely a synthetic concept, widely associated with the EU and its interest in narrating a common culture and history to construct civic and political unity (Lähdesmäki 2019). Stråth (2002, p. 388) argues that “the history of a European identity is the history of a concept and a discourse”, and that, rather than constituting an identity “in the proper sense of the word”, it “takes on the proportion of an ideology”. Stråth’s conception of a European identity is comparable to the artificial creation of ‘imagined communities’ in the case of nations: as Anderson (1983, p. 6) claims, nations are “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, [...] yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”. Similarly, to Gellner (1964, p. 169), “[n]ationalism [...] invents nations where they do not exist”. Gellner defined nationalism as “the general imposition of a high culture on society” via “a school-mediated, academy supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of a reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication” (Gellner 1983, p. 57). This strongly supports Stråth’s and Lähdesmäki’s respective claims that a ‘European identity’ is primarily discursive. Indeed, Lähdesmäki (2019, p. 795) argues that the EU draws on founding historical myths to justify its political aims of deeper integration, presenting them as “choiceless and morally and ethically legitimated”. These include the myths of:

- historical continuity, from antiquity and ancient civilisations through to the Enlightenment, and the values “explained as originating from those times”; and

- “destruction, temporal break and rebirth”, primarily associated with the two World Wars, though additionally with “the struggle against communist regimes” in CEE (Lähdesmäki pp.786–790).

It would be hyperbolic to speak of the “pan-European nationalism” once feared by Arendt (1954, p. 450) — who in the mid-twentieth century “movement for a united Europe” observed “decidedly nationalistic traits” borne of an “anti-American” sentiment. Nonetheless, the ways in which the EU propagates the idea of a trans-European identity are clear. The frequent use of symbols, including those on passports, or EU flags displayed alongside national ones, are constant, “banal” reminders of who ‘we’ are (Billig 1995, p. 38). In education, the Erasmus+ scheme promotes cultural exchanges between young people across Europe, leading to speculation that the scheme promotes a pan-European identity. As Wilson (2011, p. 1114) writes, the so-called “Erasmus generation [...] is made up of young people who have enjoyed the practical benefits of European integration, are highly mobile, think of themselves as European citizens, and consequently are a base of support for further European integration”. Indeed, as Prati, Cicognani and Mazzoni (2019, p. 651) write, “European integration and its legitimacy” are dependent on creating a “transnational political community that transcends national boundaries”, which can be strengthened by “direct contact” between European citizens. Thus, whilst it would be disingenuous to speak of a European nation, the promotion of a European ‘identity’ can be understood as something intentionally and institutionally “imposed”, including via education (Gellner 1983, p. 57).

Less widely discussed is how a ‘European identity’ promotes othering through in-group favouritism and outgroup discrimination (Tajfel 1981). This is visible, for example, in the pejorative use of the term ‘fortress Europe’ to refer to attitudes and policies towards immigration within the internally ‘open’ EU (Fauser, Friedrichs and Harders 2019). As Stråth (2002, p. 388) writes, a ‘European identity’ often contains “subtexts of racial chauvinism, particularly when confronted with Islam”. Echoing Said (1978, p. 3), who argues that

“European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient”, Stråth (2002, p. 388) claims that “Europe acquires distinction and salience when pitted against the Other”, yet “[w]hen the differences within Europe are emphasized, it is often in the form of unity in diversity”. This has also been applied throughout history to ‘Eastern Europe’, though Stråth (2002, p. 393) claims it was rarely bestowed “the radical otherness ascribed to non-European ‘barbarians’”, occupying “an ambiguous space [...] entangled with the evolving Orientalism”. Indeed, Kuus (2004, p. 473) asserts that “Europeanness” risks adopting Orientalist discourses, which subsequently risks categorising Europe into “a fully European core and not-yet-fully European Eastern Europe” (see also Todorova’s [2009] characterisation of the Balkans as the ‘other within’). Thus, to Stråth (2002, p. 393), the historic “construction of Eastern Europe was a paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion: Europe, but, at the same time, not Europe”. This illustrates CEE elites’ enthusiasm in framing EU membership as a ‘return’ to their respective states’ ‘natural’ position in European ‘civilisation’ (Szczerbiak 2021); however, doing so also risks conforming to their external construction as “not-yet-fully European” (Kuus 2004, p. 473).

Attempting to explore “whether or not European identity has an empirical base or is merely a matter of Bruxellois propaganda”, Rother and Nebe (2009, p. 121) ask if those who exercise greater mobility within the EU “have a stronger attachment to [it] compared to stayers”. Closely aligning with Tajfel’s (1981, p. 255) conceptualisation of social groups and “the value and emotional significance attached to” membership of them, and with Anderson (1983), they understand European identity as “linked to the awareness of one’s feeling of belonging to an imagined category of ‘Europeans’”. If exercising free movement cultivates a stronger attachment to the EU, it would seem logical that when Poland joined the EU and within three years one million people emigrated from the country (Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, p. 132), many of those emigrants would experience that attachment. As Rother and Nebe (2009,

p. 120) write, “European citizens who live in an EU country other than their native one come in closer contact with many of the EU’s policies than those who stay at home”, thus “if experienced as positive”, this may increase “their level of Europeanness”.

Using European Internal Movers Social Survey (EIMSS) and Eurobarometer data, Rother and Nebe (2009, p. 152) “strongly confirm the hypothesis that EU movers are more highly Europeanized than stayers”. In fact, around half of their sample of ‘movers’ possess strong tripartite identities, associating strongly with their origin and residence countries, and with Europe; this earns them the label of “‘perfect Europeans’ who do not experience conflict between [origin country] and [residence country] identities and who find it easy to develop an ‘intercultured’ European identity layer on the basis of their bi-culturalism” (p. 152). Members of this group “tend to hold a university diploma, speak the [residence country] language, engage in political discussions and, most importantly, have several friends from both the country of origin and the country of residence” (p. 152). Further investigation of the Eurobarometer data reveals that those who rarely have “difficulties paying bills” and come from urban areas are also most likely to identify as European (European Commission 2021, p. 76). Rother and Nebe (2009, p. 154) argue that the correlation between European identity and educational attainment may be attributable to the European Commission’s promotion of a European identity “based [...] on civic elements only (institutions, flag, European passport and so on), that presuppose a certain level of ‘knowledge’”, rather than one “based on affect (a feeling of solidarity, shared cultural heritage and so on)”, concluding that “[a] more affective, culture-based European identity might be more easily accessible to all tiers of European society”. However, this could risk stimulating the “pan-European nationalism” once feared by Arendt (1954, p. 450), which the promotion of “civic elements only” perhaps avoids.

The connection between free movement and ‘Europeanness’ has direct relevance to this thesis. If EU accession signified a ‘return to Europe’, and exercising free movement stimulated

people's sense of a European identity — with the timeframe between 2004 and 2016 providing a long, stable period for transnational European identities to develop — it seems likely that 2016 would mark a critical juncture for those identities among highly educated A8 migrants in the UK.

Investigating the changing identities of UK-based second-generation Polish migrants in the Brexit era, White and Goodwin (2021) conceptualise the post-2004 CEE migration wave and the 2016 EU referendum as 'critical events' for UK-based Poles. They draw from Saeed and Skey's (2016, cited in White and Goodwin 2021, p. 411) description of the September 11 attacks and their aftermath as a "critical event" for British and US-born Egyptians, since they "helped consolidate a sense of Muslim identity [...] in the face of increased Islamophobia". For British-born Poles, the 'critical events' of 2004 and 2016 meant two very different things, with the latter bringing a sudden and largely unexpected end to what had been a hitherto stable situation. White and Goodwin's (2021) conclusions focus on EU accession, giving little space to Brexit besides the assumption that if EU accession is indeed 'critical', Brexit must be too. Thus, they open the possibility of researching its 'critical' impact on Poles' identities in the UK now that more time has passed, since both the referendum and its legal ratification.

2.5. Brexit: A referendum on immigration?

On 23 June 2016, the British electorate voted in a referendum to leave the EU by 51.9% to 48.1% (Carl, Dennison and Evans 2019). The outcome came as a surprise to many experts, who Menon (2017, p. 122) claims, "all anticipated that voters would heed the elites' advice" to remain in the EU. This contra-expectations puzzle gained significant scholarly attention, particularly in the referendum's immediate aftermath, as the years-long process of Brexit began. Menon (2017) claims that, whilst multiple deficiencies of the Remain campaign in 2016 ultimately contributed to the Leave campaign's close 'win', "longer-term trends" primarily

created Brexit, principally “rising distrust of politicians and experts, years of grinding economic austerity, and a political establishment that had converged on the center” (p. 122). However, Menon holds that in the years immediately preceding 2016, the “most serious” mistake made by Cameron’s team involved immigration, namely promising to bring net annual immigration to the UK from hundreds of thousands down to tens of thousands, which directly contradicted the EU’s principle of free movement and was therefore “impossible to keep” (p. 123). This helped to bring immigration to the forefront of the debate whilst framing EU membership as the primary barrier to reducing net migration.

Various studies highlight the negative coverage in the British media towards EU migrants in the UK, particularly those from CEE, primarily in its tabloid press (Spigelman 2013; Morrison 2019; Rzepnikowska 2019; Walter 2019; Martins 2021). This was evident not only in the years immediately after 2004, but also in noticeable peaks following the 2008 global financial crisis and, especially, before the 2016 EU referendum. In the months preceding the referendum, Rzepnikowska (2019, p. 66) finds that “reporting of immigration more than tripled”, with overwhelmingly negative coverage featuring in the *Express*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, and with Poles being particularly singled out. Such exclusionary portrayals are likely to have impacted the group’s feelings of inclusion and belonging (Guma and Dafydd-Jones 2019). Rzepnikowska (2019, p. 61) notes how, “[a]fter months of anti-immigrant rhetoric in the run up to EU referendum [...] the number of racially aggravated offences recorded by the police in [July 2016] was 41 per cent higher than in July 2015”, citing several incidents in which the perpetrators targeted Poles. Whether or not the EU referendum really was a referendum on migration, these portrayals and incidents would have made it easy for EU citizens in the UK to construct a narrative in which it was. UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE 2023, p. 7) reports succinctly that “if the UK’s vote to leave the EU was a vote for, or more

specifically against, anything, it was a vote against free movement of workers within the EU, and for a new approach to managing immigration to the UK”.

2.6. The post-Brexit immigration system, summarised

As discussed, immigration is widely considered a driver of the vote to leave the EU (Menon 2017; Rzepnikowska 2019). However, as noted in UKICE’s recent report on post-Brexit changes to the UK’s immigration system, “although most voters expected Brexit to result in a fall in immigration, Vote Leave’s commitment was to end free movement and to introduce a new system for work migration that does not discriminate by country of origin and that prioritises skilled work”, something the immigration system introduced in January 2021 broadly achieves (UKICE 2023, p. 4).

Protection of the rights of EU, EEA and Swiss citizens already settled in the UK before 2021 was broadly agreed on throughout the Brexit negotiations (UKICE 2023, p. 8). The introduction of the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) in 2019 required EU citizens to apply for ‘settled status’ if they could prove residence of at least five years by 31 December 2020, or ‘pre-settled status’ if they had been resident for under five years (p. 8). Over six million applied to the EUSS, with over 90% receiving settled or pre-settled status (p. 8). For the two million granted pre-settled status, the obligation originally remained “to make a new application to transition to (full and permanent) ‘settled status’ before the expiry of their pre-settled status after five years”, though this requirement was found to be unlawful (p. 27).

For EU citizens seeking to relocate to the UK today, the new immigration system is much more restrictive, though relatively little has changed for non-EU citizens. UKICE (2023, pp. 10–11) summarises the new system as follows:

Workers must have a job offer from an employer with a sponsor licence, earning at least £25,600 in most cases (jobs on the shortage occupation list require a salary of at least £20,480). Jobs not classified as ‘skilled’ [...] are usually ineligible. [...] For non-EU citizens, the new system is thus more liberal. The salary requirement is just over £4,000

lower than it was before Brexit, middle-skilled jobs such as skilled trades are newly eligible for sponsored work visas, and there are more opportunities for graduates to get unsponsored work visas.

Although the EUSS broadly protected the rights of EU citizens already living in the UK, it still necessitated a change in legal status. Instead of enjoying automatic rights based on citizenship, individuals became eligible to reside in the UK based on happening to have lived in the country for a sufficient duration of time, and having correctly completed an application by the required date. This is likely to have impacted feelings of belonging among EU citizens continuing to live in the UK.

2.7. Impacts of Brexit on Polish and other EU citizens in the UK: Empirical research

After the EU referendum, the experiences of EU migrants in the UK received renewed scholarly attention, and a substantial literature was produced on the effects of Brexit: particularly on the topics of belonging and on decision-making processes behind staying in the UK or returning to the EU. There was a pressing need for research of this kind during the uncertain Brexit process, establishing its immediate impact upon EU citizens living in the UK. Whilst the two are closely linked, this section focuses first on the literature published during the Brexit process about migrants' decision-making processes, before assessing literature from the same period about the process's impacts on feelings of belonging and inclusion.

2.7.1. "Should we stay or should we go?": Research on migrant decision-making

In the years immediately after Brexit, a wealth of literature was published on the decision-making processes of EU citizens in the UK. Klimavičiūtė *et al.* (2020) focus on Polish and Lithuanian young people (ages 19–36) in the UK and the effects of the EU referendum on their migration decisions. They focus on life-course migration theory, which “stresses the fluidity of migration and suggests that migration correlates with major life events” — which, they argue,

“are particularly relevant for migration that occurs in youth”, i.e., migration that takes place for study, work, or family purposes (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 129). They also focus on “whether migrants understand their post-Brexit referendum decisions to be permanent or temporary”, since “[t]ransnational theories argue that, in a globalised world, national borders no longer prevent migrants from maintaining cross-border relations”, observing that young people are also more likely to follow a transnational way of life (p. 129). Thus, they indicate that ‘liquid’ migration is theoretically easier at a younger age (Engbersen and Snel 2013).

University graduates dominate the sample, which likely influenced their findings, particularly that Brexit had “little impact” on participants’ decisions “to stay in the UK or return to the country of origin” (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 127). They find that the referendum was superseded by “work, family and lifestyle considerations” (p. 127), which arguably demonstrates Silvey’s (2004, p. 5) claim that migrants are not “disembodied actors [...] acting in response to the political-economic structures organizing their mobility”. It also demonstrates the importance of ‘anchoring’, with the listed considerations all being indicators of ‘anchoredness’ (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018).

Despite a referendum outcome widely perceived as fuelled by anti-migrant sentiment, and the then-ongoing process of negotiating Brexit, participants in Klimavičiūtė *et al.*’s (2020) study mostly felt that “nothing had changed” and relied on their “settled life” and “long residence in the UK” as reassurances that things remained unlikely to do so (p. 134). In other words, their self-perception as “good migrants” who contributed to the local labour market, paid tax, and lacked criminal records was a source of reassurance they would easily continue living in the UK (Anderson 2015, cited in Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 134). This indicates that, considering the participants’ relatively privileged position as mostly securely employed and university educated, being anchored to the UK provided security, rather than the opposite.

Klimavičiūtė *et al.* (2020, p. 139) present Brexit as a “rupture in ‘easy transnationalism’” and find this is “the main negative consequence of Brexit feared by [CEE] migrants in the UK”. Thus, whilst fears about losing the right to remain in the UK were low, fears around losing the ease of travel and relocation “for self-development, career-building, exploration, the exchange of various forms of capital and the building of their own sense of identity and home in the context of the rest of Europe” were greater (p. 139). EU free movement enables many non-economic opportunities that can be more difficult to achieve with other types of migration, and “events like Brexit continue to threaten” these opportunities and the processes of “post-return transnationalism, double return and circular migration” (p. 139). The paper thus illustrates how, for certain demographics, aspects of ‘lifestyle migration’, made easier by the scope for ‘liquidity’ provided by EU free movement, significantly contribute to transnational identity building through a general ease of mobility, something which Brexit threatens (Benson and O’Reilly 2009, 2016).

Writing much sooner after the referendum, Czubińska *et al.* (2018) investigate decision-making processes from micro- and macro-psychological perspectives. In a study of around 600 Poles living in the UK from diverse backgrounds (e.g., 49% with a university education, 51% without), they investigate decisions to stay or leave after Brexit, correlating this with education level and gender. They find that those with a basic or secondary education were slightly more concerned about the impact of Brexit on their family and life plans than those with a university degree (p. 99). This is likely because members of this group are generally more vulnerable, being less likely to have secure employment, advanced language proficiency, and strong social networks and connections. This vulnerability may also contribute to their lower likelihood of acquiring a ‘European identity’ compared to those who “hold a university diploma, speak the [residence country] language, engage in political discussions and, most importantly, have several friends from both the country of origin and the country of residence” (Rother and Nebe

2009, p. 152). This is likely to intersect with feelings of security, since these characteristics may indicate a greater ease and preparedness to relocate.

At the time, Czubińska *et al.* (2018) found that an overwhelming majority (87%) were considering returning to Poland, though half (51%) were considering staying, with substantial overlap due to those “weighing their options” (p. 95). Additionally, 33% responded that they were undecided, but only 11% “stated that they will definitely return to Poland” (p. 95). There were many factors putting participants off returning to Poland, including, chiefly, a potential drop in wages (67%), lower living standards (66%) and a lack of jobs (59%), whilst 49% also cited concerns about “the political situation in Poland” (p. 97).

The large-scale study presents a brief but significant snapshot of decision-making processes among the Polish community in the UK in the near-immediate aftermath of the referendum, demonstrating the period’s immense uncertainty for UK-based EU migrants, put succinctly in its title: “Should we stay or should we go?”. It illustrates the sheer scale of Poles in the UK who considered returning to Poland at this time, in numbers much higher than might have been suggested by earlier discussions of circular and liquid migration.

Surveying around 500 long-term Polish migrants in the UK, Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska (2020, p. 102) use a push-pull framework to determine the impacts of their “perceptions” of a variety of Brexit-related factors on whether to stay in the UK or leave. They argue that ‘liquid migration’ theory would imply “a massive movement when the circumstances worsen” since Polish migrants were expected to “[react] to the conditions and opportunities of the moment” and “the atmosphere during the Brexit negotiations could be interpreted as one discouraging migrants from staying in the UK”, though this did not materialise immediately after Brexit (pp. 103–105). They thus investigate the reasons for “the lack of any dramatic ‘Brexodus’ in the ONS migration statistics” (p. 105).

The paper supports more quantitatively the findings of Klimavičiūtė *et al.* (2020) that the referendum appeared to have little impact on migration decisions. It is, however, worth noting that, according to ONS estimates, by the end of 2019 the number of Poles in the UK was 818,000, down from a peak in 2017 of 922,000 — reflecting relatively little change around Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska’s (2020) time of writing — yet by June 2021, when the dataset was discontinued, the figure had substantially dropped to 682,000 (ONS 2021). Whilst it is important to note that the ONS reweighted its data in 2020 — potentially creating a distortion — the figures might indicate that there was simply a delay to the ‘Brexodus’ until the details of Brexit became clearer, though other factors could have also had an impact, notably COVID-19.

Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska (2020, p. 105) argue that “prolonged indeterminacy and non-permanent settlement are not new features of post-accession migration”, simply general features of EU citizenship. They draw upon perspectives such as Kay and Trevena’s (2018, p. 27) framing of “migration and settlement [...] as open-ended processes which emerge over time and for a range of reasons”, where migration may initially serve as “a short-term solution to insecurities ‘back home’”, until acquiring “material and emotional securities” prompts people “to rethink their stay as a longer-term commitment” — i.e., undergo the process of ‘anchoring’ (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018). EU accession thus made ‘liquid’ migration decisions theoretically possible for many A8 migrants, but these certainly did not always define migration patterns. Indeed, many Poles who moved to the UK stayed for the long-term, often bringing families with them (Haas, Castles and Miller 2022, p. 132; Okólski and Salt 2014, p. 13; Kay and Trevena 2018).

Overall, Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska (2020, p. 112) find the most common factor encouraging Poles to stay in the UK was their earnings level (46%); the top four reasons for staying were all work-related. Of the reasons discouraging participants from

staying, overwhelmingly the most popular answer was “nothing” (54%), with “changes brought by Brexit” ranking a very distant second (15%). The authors note little concern among participants about their rights in the UK, which they argue stems from their confidence in maintaining the right to remain in the country (p. 112).

Since only participants still in the UK were interviewed, it is possible that those who had already left by this time would have had the strongest responses to the referendum result, and may have been among the most vulnerable groups. This could challenge their conclusion that Brexit had little overall impact on migration decisions. Nonetheless, the paper demonstrates that decisions to remain continued to be based primarily on economic factors, which did not immediately change after Brexit — these began to change more dramatically from 2020, for various reasons (World Bank 2023b; 2023c). Important considerations such as ‘anchoring’ also illustrate why the referendum did not immediately produce a mass ‘Brexodus’, since re-negotiating “the process of searching for footholds [...] to acquire socio-psychological stability”, leaving behind friendships, social connections and more, is unlikely to be something many were prepared to do unless absolutely necessary (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018, p. 253).

In another survey of around 900 Poles living in the UK, conducted in the four months immediately preceding the referendum, McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni (2017) adopt a “rights-based” perspective around decision-making processes. They argue that socio-economic and demographic factors are insufficient in explaining decision-making, and that “aspects such as interest in and awareness of one’s rights, as well as anxieties about the ability to maintain one’s rights in the future are stronger determinants” of “future migration and civic integration plans” (McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017, p. 1109). This, again, is likely to be strongly influenced by factors such as educational attainment. The literature on EU migrants’ decision-making demonstrates overall why Brexit did not immediately cause a widely expected ‘Brexodus’ (Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska 2020, p. 105), explained largely by a

combination of settled or ‘anchored’ lives in the UK (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018), and a perception among some that they are “good migrants” and therefore confident in retaining the right to live in the UK (Anderson 2015, cited in Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 134). Nonetheless, fear around what Brexit could mean for migrants’ future plans was evident during the uncertain Brexit process (Czubińska *et al.* 2018). Those with a university education or secure work were at least slightly less likely to feel concerned about Brexit (Czubińska *et al.* 2018): as discussed earlier, more secure demographics were also less likely to experience “social isolation from the native population”, enabling them to attain more footholds, especially social, to enable them to lead more a more ‘anchored’ existence (Kay and Trevena 2019, p. 165). As time passes after the finalisation of Brexit, there will remain a continued need for research on its impact on EU migrants’ decision-making.

2.7.2. Impacts of Brexit on feelings of belonging and identity

Closely linked to research on decision-making in the aftermath of the referendum is the wealth of research that emerged on feelings of inclusion and belonging in the UK and broader questions related to identity. Using interviews from February 2016–October 2017 with around 40 EU migrants from Portugal and across Central Europe living in Wales, Guma and Dafydd-Jones (2019) highlight that hostility and violence were common experiences for Polish migrants “during and after the referendum campaign”, alongside uncertainty and insecurity, particularly for those in more vulnerable positions. They stress that “Brexit affected not only EU migrants’ rights and entitlements but also their settlement and sense of identity and belonging”, thus it “should be understood as an ongoing process of ‘othering’ and unsettling” (Guma and Dafydd-Jones 2019, p. 1).

Overall, Guma and Dafydd-Jones (2019, p. 2) “argue that the referendum intensified an already hostile environment for (many) EU migrants”. The migrants in question included Roma

individuals from Slovakia and Czechia, and “a few Portuguese nationals [...] from African countries such as Mozambique”, most of whom “worked in low-paid and demanding jobs” (p. 4): their “attachments and sense of belonging” in Wales were significantly disrupted, and they had “deep-seated anxieties about being marginalised further” (p. 8). Guma and Dafydd-Jones (2019, p. 8) document evidence of an increase in “hostility, physical and verbal abuse” experienced personally or by people known by participants, and find that, combined with sociolegal uncertainties, these threaten their sense of attachment to their localities, Wales, and the UK. They also find that Brexit “disrupted [the] open-ended process of belonging”, in which various kinds of attachment are built and maintained, made worse by the fact that migrants’ identities are often ‘anchored’ and it can be “unaffordable to move on and (re)start their lives in their ‘home’ countries or elsewhere” (contrary to ‘liquid migration’ theories) (p. 8). The study, particularly when compared to the study by Klimavičiūtė *et al.* (2020), illustrates the disparity between relatively privileged and more vulnerable EU migrants. The participants included ethnic minorities, were less financially secure, and were based in relatively remote settings with limited diversity, making them more vulnerable to abuse and hostility and, crucially, less financially able to alter their circumstances. It thus also highlights the potential class blindness present in much of the theoretical literature forecasting A8 migrants’ ‘liquidity’.

Until a recent paper by Bogacki *et al.* (2023), published in June, no research appeared to have specifically addressed the relationship between Brexit and a ‘European identity’ among EU migrants in the UK, with the relationship between Brexit and transnationalism in general being understudied (Benson *et al.* 2022). Bogacki *et al.* (2023) investigate changes to European identity and spatial imaginaries of Europe (or “EUrope”) among Polish migrants in Scotland during the post-referendum negotiation period (2016–2020). Based on interviews conducted in summer 2019 with around 20 Polish migrants in Edinburgh (urban) and Moray county (rural), they find that Brexit may not have directly affected their European identities, but it did prompt

participants to “to reconsider their place in Europe and to reimagine both the geographical and conceptual parameters of Europe” (Bogacki *et al.* 2023, p. 1). Contrary to other “evidence suggesting that Brexit has strengthened European identity among [EU] citizens” in the UK, their interviews and “spatial mapping exercises” indicate that “European identity [at least] among Polish migrants in Scotland has not been significantly affected” (p. 12). They suggest this could be explained by the fact that, unlike British citizens, “Polish passport holders” and other EU citizens “remain European”, meaning they can take a European identity for granted and see it as a “last resort” (p. 12). However, with Brexit having since been finalised with a migration policy significantly less favourable to EU migrants, the topic has gained renewed salience.

2.8. Conclusions: Main trends and observations in the literature

This literature review has conceptualised migration, emphasising its intrinsic role in human history (Haas, Castles and Miller 2020, p. 23). This partly explains the “human agency” central to migrants’ decision-making, regardless of “the political-economic structures organizing their mobility” (Silvey 2004, p. 5). It has critically explored theories of transnationalism, liquid migration and anchoring, emphasising the importance of establishing security and belonging — particularly, but not exclusively, among more vulnerable migrant groups (Vertovec 2001; Engbersen and Snel 2013; Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018). It has emphasised the role of a European identity in narratives surrounding Poland’s EU accession, and the significant flow of emigration to the UK that followed (Szczurbiak 2021; Kaczmarczyk 2012). It has critically assessed the meaning of a ‘European identity’ and considered the application of the term in this thesis (Arendt 1954; Stråth 2002), arguing that Brexit may threaten people’s affiliation with the idea — particularly those aspects stimulated by free movement, for those demographics most benefitting from it (Rother and Nebe 2009; Wilson 2011). It has outlined the dominance

of immigration in Brexit's narratives and its likely impact on migrants' feelings of inclusion in the UK (Menon 2017; Rzepnikowska 2019), before briefly outlining the post-Brexit immigration system (UKICE 2023). Finally, it has provided an in-depth analysis of various literature about the impact of Brexit on EU migrants in the UK published since 2016, divided into two categories: (1) Brexit's impact on decision-making processes about staying in the UK or leaving (McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017; Czubińska *et al.* 2018; Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020; Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska 2020); and (2) Brexit's impact on feelings of belonging, inclusion, and identity (Guma and Dafydd-Jones 2019; Bogacki *et al.* 2023).

An additional key concept in the literature, as discussed, is White and Goodwin's (2021) depiction of Poland's EU accession and Brexit as 'critical events' for Poles in the UK. Brexit clearly disrupted the right to free movement that is associated with — and which caused the creation of — the term 'liquid migration'. Despite this, relatively little concern among those settled in the UK seemed to be identified across the literature about retaining legal rights to stay in the country. More vulnerable EU migrants, however, seemed to experience a dramatic impact when it came to their overall sense of belonging (Guma and Dafydd-Jones 2019). This illustrates the greater accessibility of transnational identity-building, 'liquid' patterns of migration and a 'European identity' among highly educated, high-skilled professionals who are financially secure and have advanced language skills. It also demonstrates the relevance of empirical observations around 'anchoring': it is people's 'anchoredness', in terms of their belonging and attachment within the UK, that was most threatened by Brexit.

3. Methodology and sample

3.1. Focus, aims and conceptualisation

The purpose of this thesis is to generate new empirical data on the thoughts and experiences of Polish university graduates in the UK, before investigating indicators of a European identity among participants and attempting to understand if and how these have been redefined by Brexit in the period following the UK's final exit from the EU. The thesis is focused on the "idea" of a European identity, as discussed in the literature review (Str ath 2002, p. 288). If European identities are fostered by intra-EU migration, as Rother and Nebe (2009) find, it seems likely Brexit would affect these identities for university educated EU citizens living in the UK. Many have speculated about the mid-to-long-term impacts of Brexit on such identity-related questions without thoroughly examining them (McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017; White and Goodwin 2019; Botterill and Hancock 2019). With the Brexit transition period formally ending on 31 December 2020, and with international travel broadly back to its pre-COVID-19 state (c. 2022), now marks a critical juncture to investigate this.

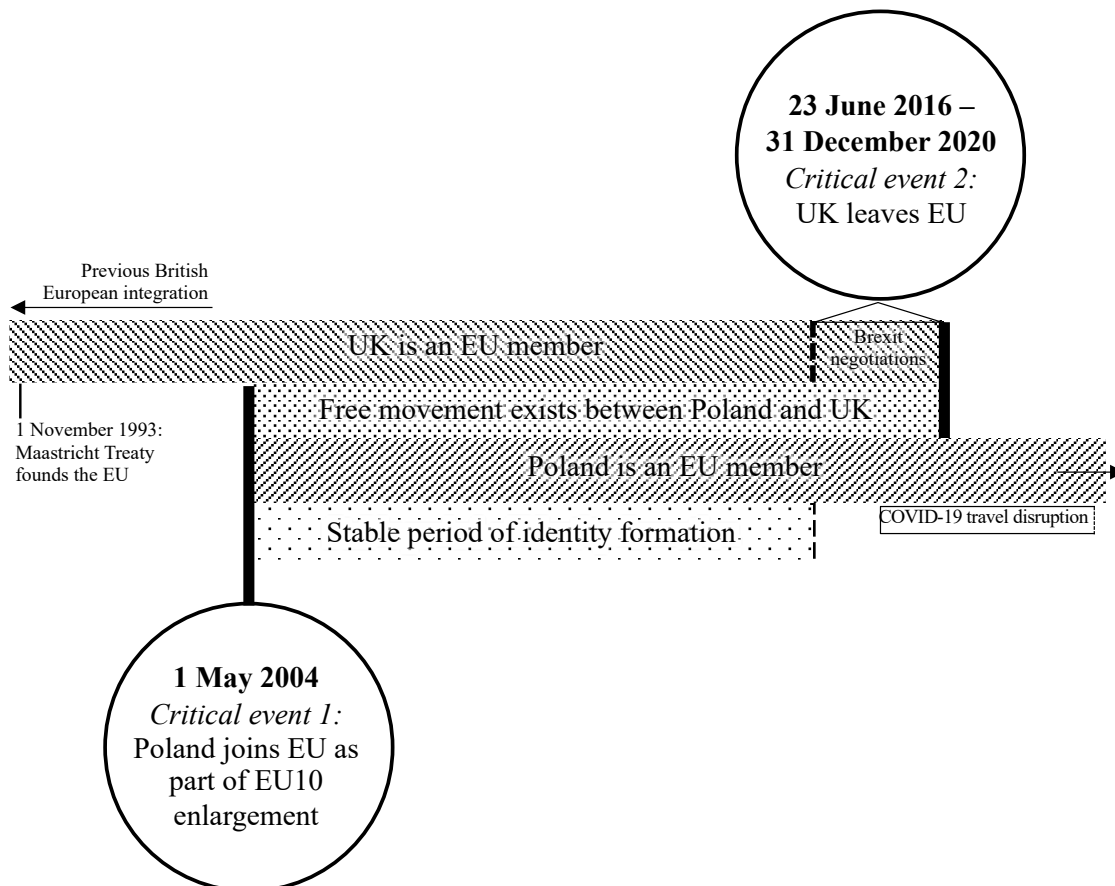
Whilst the effects of Brexit on Polish and other EU citizens are well researched, it does not appear that any study has focused directly on its relationship with the concept of European identity — with the exception of Bogacki *et al.* (2023), who use data from before the ratification of Brexit. During the Brexit negotiation process, there was a pressing need to research its immediate impacts on UK-based EU citizens. However, the UK has now been a third country for over two years, enabling a greater focus on broader identity-related questions.

The thesis takes as one of its key concepts White and Goodwin's (2021) aforementioned conceptualisation of the post-2004 migration wave and 2016 EU referendum as "critical events" for British-born Poles, but instead applies it to Polish-born Poles who exercised free movement to the UK after 2004. For them, Poland's EU accession was 'critical' because it provided them with the free movement rights that facilitated their relocation to the UK. Brexit

was likely more ‘critical’ for this group, since both countries’ simultaneous EU membership facilitated their relocation to the UK and, before the EUSS, is what provided the legal right to live and work there (see Figure 1).

The research is also inspired by Kusek’s (2015, p. 102) focus on Polish “professionals and social and financial elites” in London, and her observation that university-educated professionals are more likely to exhibit transnational identities. Kusek’s understanding of ‘elite’ can be critiqued: the profile of her sample suggests virtually anyone with a degree meets the criteria. This overlooks the fact that many CEE migrants in the UK are overqualified for their jobs, often ‘stuck’ in low-skilled employment despite having university degrees (Kay and Trevena 2019, pp. 162–163). Nonetheless, this focus provides insights into the “cosmopolitan” and “transnational” attitudes of university-educated Poles living and working in London (Kusek 2015, p. 102) — a foundation that can be further developed post-Brexit.

Figure 1. Timeline of ‘critical events’ (source: author)



3.2. Research questions

The following questions directed this project's design:

In what ways has Brexit impacted the transnational European identities of Polish university graduates who moved to the UK after 2004?

Do Polish university graduates who exercised free movement to relocate to the UK identify strongly with Europe?

I sought indicative answers to these questions within the context of the participants, aiming to “generat[e] understanding” about them (Stenbacka 2001, p. 551). This is substantiated in sections 3.3 and 3.4 below.

3.3. Case study

Since no post-withdrawal studies appear to exist on the relationship between Brexit and the European identities of UK-based EU citizens, let alone Polish university graduates, I use a single hypothesis-generating case study. As Ndame (2023, p. 69) writes, “hypothesis-generating case studies contribute to the *process* of theory construction rather than to theory itself”. The thesis therefore investigates first-generation post-accession Polish migrants to the UK with a university level of education. The demographic is sufficiently large and diverse that intersections with other demographics can arise, whilst post-2004 migrants provide a specific focus on EU-facilitated (thus directly Brexit-impacted) migration and identity among a group (university graduates) more likely to experience this. Indeed, besides Kusek's observations, Rother and Nebe (2009, p. 159) find in a large-N quantitative study that “intra-EU migrants who identify with the EU are also the most educated ones”. The thesis is also focused on young adults, who Klimavičiūtė *et al.* (2020, p. 129) note are more likely to adopt a “transnational way of life”, and experience “key life events” whilst “on the move”. Those who graduated recently are less likely to be settled in one place and may be flexible in their life plans, as they consider their options for career progression and self-development. A focus on this group thus

has the potential to reveal insights and “generat[e] understanding” about migration, Brexit, and identity formation as a whole (Stenbacka 2001, p. 551).

3.4. Method

I conducted semi-structured interviews in English with 16 participants between April–June 2023 — a similar number to comparable studies (Kusek 2015; Bogacki *et al.* 2023). As Galletta (2013, pp. 1–2) writes, semi-structured interviews offer “unique flexibility”, “sufficiently structured to address specific dimensions of [a] research question while also leaving space for study participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study”. Jain (2021, p. 552) argues that, though time consuming, interviews can offer “unexpected” details for exploratory research, providing “deeper insight” than survey data. Similar studies use this method, indicating its suitability for understanding personal responses to Brexit and individual migration narratives.

Participants normally living in London (N=9) and Glasgow (N=7) were recruited, partly since both cities voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU. Scotland has a distinct national identity and, unlike England and Wales, voted against Brexit (Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2019). As Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira (2020, p. 7) find, Brexit amplified Scotland’s distinctiveness *versus* England “as a ‘welcoming’ place for immigrants”. Glasgow, Scotland’s largest city, can be characterised “as a city of immigration”, captured under its slogan ‘People make Glasgow’ (Kay and Trevena 2019, p. 161). London, too, voted overwhelmingly for ‘Remain’ (Dorling, Stuart and Stubbs 2016); a capital of over 10 million, it is a case study in “super-diversity”, described in its local government’s communications as “the world in one city” (Vertovec 2007, pp. 1024–5).

Recruitment began through numerous contacts who were previously known through diverse sources thus did not know each other. This enabled snowballing through several different networks, creating a relatively diverse sample of participants from each city. Nearly

all initial contacts provided at least one additional contact, and most additional contacts provided at least one more. Some initial contacts were not themselves eligible participants, but had suitable links with people who were. Any adult younger than 35 who has completed a university degree, holds Polish citizenship, moved to the UK after 1 May 2004 and lives in London or Glasgow was eligible.

By the end, participants with a variety of experiences had been recruited. Their initial migrations covered a range of years after 2004. Some moved with their families as young children or teenagers, others by themselves as adults. Most moved directly to either Glasgow or London, though some moved first to other places.

Most participants were in their early-to-mid-twenties. 12 had graduated within the past three years and were aged 21–24, whilst two were in the 25–28 age range, and two within the 29–32 range. A reasonable gender balance was achieved, with nine female and seven male participants. Though a small number mentioned long-term partners, none were married or had children. Ten were in full-time employment, three were about to begin a master's degree, and three, all in the 21–24 age range, were recent graduates contemplating their next steps.

One-to-one interviews were conducted over video call, making it possible to speak to people from Glasgow and London interchangeably while based in Poland. It also made it easy for interviews to be conducted from participants' private spaces where they felt most comfortable and would not be overheard, helping them to speak more freely. Moreover, this ensured minimal inconvenience for participants, since no travel was required.

As Stenbacka (2001, p. 551) argues, qualitative research is mainly for “generating understanding” rather than explaining, since applying “[q]uality concepts [...] relevant for quantitative research” to qualitative research “leads to unnecessary limitations and to false conclusions of social phenomena”. This guided the interpretivist approach taken, particularly during the analysis stage; however, indicative answers to the research questions were still

sought and proposed, and the interviews were designed to elicit these by identifying indicators of transnationalism, views about Europe, and feelings about Brexit alongside gaining an in-depth understanding of the participants' migration narratives so that trends could emerge.

An interview guide was prepared in advance with three key themes, and several key questions under each theme (see appendix 1). The guide's structure broadly followed that proposed by Galletta (2013, pp. 45–53), with: (1) an opening segment designed to establish a clear narrative from which to base later questions; (2) a middle segment with more specific questions, “after some degree of trust has been established”; and (3) a concluding segment designed to “mov[e] toward closure” with more “theory-driven questions”. The sections thus related to: (1) migration, mobility and education narratives, (2) citizenship and legal status in the UK, and (3) future aspirations and views about ‘Europe’. It was vital to be attentive to narratives as they unfolded, to achieve the aim of “eliciting from the participant the meaning he or she gives to the focus of study and capturing that meaning as accurately as possible” (Galletta 2013, pp. 76–77). Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed by myself, which helped to achieve an “immersion in and with the data” (Selvi 2020, p. 444). Most interviews took 50 minutes to one hour, with three lasting closer to 1.5 hours, and three lasting around 30 minutes.

3.5. Analysis

I conducted interviews until there were clear recurring themes and few new themes were emerging, indicating a degree of data saturation and therefore that the data was suitable for in-depth qualitative content analysis — in which “latent meaning” is developed “in a context-dependent fashion” (Selvi 2020, p. 442). Qualitative content analysis “places an emphasis on research questions to eliminate any arbitrariness in the research process and to externalize the researcher's subjective standpoint” (Selvi 2020, p. 444). Interview transcripts were then

coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to thoroughly identify these themes in a “bottom up” approach and establish which were most present throughout the interviews (Guma and Dafydd-Jones 2019, p. 4). Related to the aim of “generating understanding” (Stenbacka 2001, p. 551), analysis was partially conducted through a grounded theoretical perspective, in which data collection is viewed as “inductive”, allowing “issues of importance to participants [to] emerge from the stories that they tell” without having “preconceived ideas to prove or disprove” (Mills, Bonner and Francis 2006, pp. 26–27). Nonetheless, theories and findings from the literature still guided the written analysis: as Strauss and Corbin (1998, cited in Mills, Bonner and Francis 2006, p. 29) write, intertwining existing literature in the process of evolved grounded theory can “stimulate our thinking about properties or dimensions” that might emerge in the data.

3.6. Limitations

Whilst having too much of a personal connection to a topic can increase the chances of being influenced by biases, being too distant from a topic can bring issues regarding trust and rapport. I generally did not share participants’ experiences, neither being Polish nor migrating in any capacity except for study. This risked eliciting a lack of connection and trust, especially from those who moved as young children and may have found the experience distressing or faced obstacles growing up as a minority in the UK. Migrant support organisations were listed on the plain language statements distributed beforehand and I was ready to share them again if necessary during the interview, though the organisations primarily provide technical support and legal advice. I therefore made every effort not to impose preconceptions whilst conducting and analysing the interviews, prioritising participants’ narratives. The interviews were handled sensitively, and space was given at the start to building a rapport and making participants feel

comfortable, without pressure to share anything they did not want to (including an explicit reminder of this at the beginning of each interview).

My intermediate Polish abilities made it necessary to conduct interviews in English. Although university-educated young people living in the UK on a long-term basis are likely to have good spoken English, this still risked excluding people on the basis of language. It also risked inhibiting participants from speaking freely due to communicating in a language less comfortable to them than Polish. As it happens, all participants spoke exceptional English, sometimes indistinguishable from native speakers. Nonetheless, there were some brief moments when participants said they felt they could have chosen a better word to describe something, or apologised for their English despite its exceptional level, perhaps indicating a lack of confidence or comfort in the language. In these rare instances, it was important to reassure participants that this was not an issue and give them time and space to communicate their thoughts, relying again on the comfortable and conducive atmosphere developed through initial rapport-building.

3.7. Ethical considerations

This project has been reviewed by the School of Social and Political Sciences Ethics Forum at the University of Glasgow, and the Institute of European Studies Ethics in Research Commission at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (see appendices 2 and 3). Strict requirements were observed regarding secure data storage and encryption to protect participants' identities. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and information such as locations, dates or universities has been omitted. Informed consent was sought using a plain language statement and signed consent form. Organisations were listed on the plain language statement in case participants needed support or advice, for example about their migrant status, which I was prepared to share during interviews if necessary.

4. Findings and analysis

4.1. Overview of participants

University graduates were recruited from London (N=9) and Glasgow (N=7). Their initial migrations covered a fairly even distribution of years between 2004–19: seven moved between 2004–10, five between 2011–16, and four after 2016. This led to significant variations in participants' experiences, who were of similar ages thus moved at different stages of their lives. Despite the small number who moved to the UK after the referendum, all participants moved before the UK's 2020 withdrawal from the EU, before the 2019 introduction of the EUSS and its 2021 application deadline, and before the 2021 introduction of the new immigration system.

Nine participants moved with their families as young children or as teenagers — these participants generally moved much earlier, though the latest did so around a year before the referendum. The remaining participants moved to the UK as adults for their university studies. Most participants moved directly to either Glasgow or London, although three initially moved with family to other English cities or towns, before moving to London as adults for study or work purposes. Half of the participants have completed study exchanges abroad, mostly in EU countries through the Erasmus+ programme, although one studied in Singapore and another in Russia. Most participants maintained strong links to Poland, including frequent return travel to visit family, particularly at Christmas. Some participants returned to Poland's major cities for either one or two years to gain master's degrees (N=3), for work (N=1), or for an Erasmus+ exchange (N=1), before moving back to the UK.

Most participants align with Kusek's (2015, p. 102) understanding of "professionals and social and financial elites", with five qualified lawyers, two pursuing successful careers in the arts and one in diplomacy. Four have completed master's degrees, and three were about to begin a master's degree. Virtually all have bachelor's degrees from elite British universities, and three gained subsequent master's degrees from elite Polish universities before returning to

the UK. All have international circles of friends and most frequently travel in Europe. Several have worked and studied in multiple countries. Many of their experiences therefore reflect Klimavičiūtė *et al.*'s (2020, p. 129) observation that young Europeans are more likely to observe a “transnational way of life” and may experience “key life events” whilst “on the move”; a substantial number fit the criteria of Wilson’s (2011) highly mobile ‘Erasmus generation’. Several participants were nonetheless very ‘anchored’ to the UK, especially those who have lived in the country for most of their lives and have family and the majority of their friends there. Three participants, all of whom moved to the UK as young children very shortly after EU accession, were dual Polish-British citizens, which may have contributed to this further. For reference purposes, I have provided a summary of the participants in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Research participant information

Name* and gender	Current residence	Educational attainment	Time of migration	Moved with family	Area of work	Age range	Additional notes
Jakub (M)	London	Bachelor’s degree	2004–2010	Yes	Healthcare	21–24	Dual citizen
Adam (M)	London	Bachelor’s degree	2004–2010	Yes	Diplomacy	21–24	
Krzysztof (M)	London	Master’s degree	2004–2010	Yes	Law	25–28	Dual citizen
Aleksandra (F)	London	Bachelor’s degree	2004–2010	Yes	Law	21–24	
Wiktoria (F)	Glasgow	Bachelor’s degree	2004–2010	Yes		21–24	
Karolina (F)	London	Master’s degree	2004–2010		Law	29–32	
Monika (F)	London	Bachelor’s degree	2004–2010	Yes	Arts	29–32	Dual citizen
Mateusz (M)	London	Bachelor’s degree	2011–2016	Yes	Hospitality	21–24	
Katarzyna (F)	London	Bachelor’s degree	2011–2016	Yes	Law	21–24	
Natalia (F)	Glasgow	Master’s degree	2011–2016		Law	25–28	
Paulina (F)	London	Bachelor’s degree	2011–2016	Yes	Arts	21–24	
Piotr (M)	Glasgow	Master’s degree	2011–2016			21–24	
Anna (F)	Glasgow	Bachelor’s degree	2017–2019			21–24	Starting master’s
Magdalena (F)	Glasgow	Bachelor’s degree	2017–2019			21–24	
Michał (M)	Glasgow	Bachelor’s degree	2017–2019			21–24	Starting master’s
Paweł (M)	Glasgow	Bachelor’s degree	2017–2019			21–24	Starting master’s

*pseudonym

4.2. Summary of findings

Overall, participants expressed numerous minor impacts on their feelings and sense of belonging due to Brexit. Specific legal changes associated with Brexit did not generally have a major impact on participants, likely due to their education level. For example, although some

recalled significant anxiety the day after the referendum, after the introduction of the EUSS, applying for settled or pre-settled status was straightforward for nearly all participants. Several, usually more recent migrants, felt little anxiety even after the referendum. Some did however note a loss of flexibility in their future plans under the new immigration system. Although many recalled feeling angry or upset immediately after the referendum, the language used by participants seemed to indicate at least a moderate acceptance of the post-Brexit status quo, with the UK being dealt with as a truly post-EU country, despite lingering disappointment.

Multiple factors were discussed that can be seen as indicators of a European identity. Many participants undertook Erasmus+ exchanges during their undergraduate degrees, forming lasting connections with friends from across Europe. Others mentioned close friends from across Europe who they met at university or through living in London. Some, including more ‘anchored’ participants, made few British friends despite living in the UK for several years, implying this did not prohibit them from forming attachments in the country. Whilst all participants were at least bilingual, several spoke other European languages, including Spanish, French, and Russian. Whilst most participants travelled frequently to Poland and maintained close links there — indicating a transnational existence between Poland and the UK — many travelled frequently to other European countries, often to meet friends from outside Poland and the UK, indicating a more intracontinental existence. A small number shared indicators of transnationalism beyond Europe, including study and research periods in Singapore and Mexico, family in the US, and friends in Asia, the Middle East and North America.

Asked towards the end of the interviews what it means to be European, most discussed freedom of movement, usually referencing borderless and visa-free travel, but often also the ability to live and work anywhere in the EU. In line with the project’s research design, it is therefore clear that participants did strongly associate freedom of movement with ‘Europeanness’. However, when discussing their personal identities, it was surprisingly more

‘anchored’ participants who were most likely to express a European identity, despite exhibiting fewer indicators of transnationalism — including travel and future mobility plans.

The remainder of this analysis section is broken down into three key sections. The first key section (4.3) focuses on participants’ anxiety about Brexit, both in the immediate aftermath of the referendum and in the years that followed. Perhaps counterintuitively, anxieties were found to be highest among more ‘anchored’ participants, seemingly because the implications of losing the right to reside in the country would have been more significant for them, if this had happened. As time went on, anxieties were generally much lower, demonstrably because of the advantages that the participants’ level of education granted them.

The second key section (4.4) assesses indicators of transnationalism and Europeanness, broken down into international networks and frequent travel (finding that these factors did not guarantee a stated identification with Europe); engagement with Poland (finding that those who moved as children often made efforts to re-engage with Polish society, providing access to a European identity); and flexibility in future settlement plans. Though all participants exhibited indicators of transnationalism, more ‘anchored’ participants were, surprisingly, more likely to state an identification with Europe, despite exhibiting slightly fewer of these indicators overall, particularly in their future settlement plans, which were more rooted in the UK.

The third and final key section (4.5) assesses indications of change after Brexit, broken down into changes in travel (finding that travel and free movement were commonly associated with what it means to be European, but only minor changes to travel were noted); views towards the UK (finding that those who moved to the UK as children had strong attachments to the country which came to be threatened); and attitudes towards legal status, citizenship, and future pathways (finding that more ‘anchored’ participants were likely to express negative emotions towards their changed legal status, whereas those who moved more recently often felt ‘lucky’ that their settled status afforded them the flexibility in where to live).

4.3. Brexit anxiety: The role of education in mitigating fears

This first key section assesses participants' anxiety about Brexit. Overall, participants' anxiety about Brexit was relatively low, but the general mood immediately after the referendum was usually more stressful. Interestingly, as stated above, participants who were more anchored to the UK were more likely to recall high levels of anxiety immediately after the referendum, even though one might assume this would provide security and help to reduce fears. This was linked to fears about either being forced to leave the only country they knew as home, or being forced to leave a country in which they had recently begun to feel settled after a difficult transition. Some, however, briefly referenced their lengthy residence in the UK as a source of reassurance that their status would remain secure. In the years following the referendum, most participants did not find the process of applying for settled or pre-settled status particularly difficult or stressful. Concerns about other potential changes, such as university fee status, were also low. University communications often quelled participants' fears about Brexit, and being in full-time education in the UK made it easy to prove residence when applying through the EUSS, demonstrating not only that having a higher level of education helped to reduce the stresses of Brexit, but also that being — or recently being — in higher education provided concrete advantages. Thus, participants' generally low Brexit-related anxiety can likely be linked to their education level, aligning with Czubińska *et al.*'s (2018, p. 99) findings.

4.3.1. Immediate anxieties

Although anxiety about Brexit was generally low, many participants recalled a high amount of stress the morning after the referendum, expressing disappointment, fear, and a sense of exclusion from British society. A common theme was the question of potential legal changes mandating a return to Poland. Katarzyna and Paulina, who both moved with family as teenagers to the UK only a few years before the referendum, felt a sense of “defeat”, particularly since

the initial process of moving had been so disruptive for them both. As a teenager, Katarzyna was upset when her mother first told her they would be moving together to London from a small city in Poland, stating “I didn’t have a choice”:

One day, my mum just came and she was like, ‘Well, I got a job in the UK, [...] and since you’re underage, you’re moving with me’. [...] In Poland I was like, ‘I’m going to be a lawyer’ and everything. And then I moved here and I couldn’t speak English. [...] I had a whole structure and a whole plan for my life ahead. [...] I had friends, I had family, I had school, and yeah, I just left everything behind and moved here.

For Paulina, too, the process of moving to the UK was stressful and disruptive. She described unmet expectations, sharing how her parents initially struggled to find fulfilling careers despite both parents having master’s degrees, with her father working as a delivery driver:

One of the reasons that we moved to the UK was because [my parents] felt like the time they put into their education wasn’t really paying off, and they were not being respected in their jobs and stuff like that. And they had this idea, I think, that it would be an immediate improvement, whereas it kind of took a year or two, maybe even more [...] to get to a place where now they’re happy with what they’re doing.

She described a long and emotionally challenging process of adapting to life in the UK, recalling her first year in the UK as particularly difficult:

I remember hating our house, I remember hating the school I went to, and feeling really alienated from everyone. [...] That first year was really hard. [...] And I think because our life in the UK wasn’t immediately incredible, [my dad] had a big issue with the expectations not being met, and he had a strong sentiment of wanting to go back. [...] All the things that made us move in the first place, the better opportunities for me and my sister and things like that, they didn’t seem like it was worth it. [...] I remember him crying and saying that it was a mistake. Things did get better quite quickly, though.

Both Katarzyna and Paulina therefore capture not only how migrating had been a disruptive and difficult process, but also how they had both put time and effort into settling into the UK to achieve a more anchored and ‘normal’ life (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018; Stella, Flynn and Gawlewicz 2017). It is because of this that the morning after the referendum, Paulina and Katarzyna both recalled a sense of fear because of what they could have risked losing. As Katarzyna stated:

I was actually scared and uncertain because that was one year after I moved to the UK and I’m like, ‘Great, are they going to kick us out now?’, or they’re going to tell us like,

‘No, you no longer can live here, get out’ or ‘go back to your country’ or something. [...] And I felt really unsafe, uncertain, because me and my mum, we just moved here. We established our life here, I started going to school, everything was perfect. And then suddenly, they’re like, ‘No, we don’t want Europeans in here anymore’.

Here, Katarzyna ties together this fear of having to return to Poland due to potential legal changes with a general feeling of social exclusion: the phrase “go back to your country”, which she uses in a legal sense, features in much of the hate speech documented by Guma and Dafydd-Jones (2019, pp. 5, 7) and by Heald *et al.* (2018, p. 159) during and after the referendum campaign. The phrase also has a long history of exclusion in Europe and the United States (Jowallah 2008), further illustrating the scale of upset that was caused by the referendum outcome. Moreover, her feeling that “we just moved here” and had only recently settled in, and the amount of disruption that having to return to Poland would cause, was something echoed by Paulina:

I think initially, honestly, there was a bit of panic of like, ‘Well, does this mean I have to go back?’, and it was quite upsetting because we basically just moved here, it had been three or four years at this point. And there was this sense of ‘Well, if we have to go back, that’s such a defeat’, of like, ‘We did this big thing, and now they don’t want us’.

This sense of “defeat” captures how Brexit was seen as potentially disrupting people’s settled lives in the UK, and the amount of time they had spent in the UK — long enough to develop ‘anchored’ lives, but short enough to have “basically just moved here” — was particularly frustrating.

For Aleksandra and Wiktoria, who moved with family as young children, the morning after the referendum was characterised by stress and disruption to their home lives, and a sense of insecurity for their families’ status in the UK. Aleksandra, who lives with her family in London, described a frantic morning, with her father packing up their things and her parents both considering what to do next:

My parents were planning, they were like ‘We’re moving back’. My dad, he started packing, packing, packing. I was just like, ‘Calm down, you can calm down’, like ‘Nothing’s gonna happen, I’ve been here since I was young’, and he was like ‘What are

we gonna do? [...] Is [Aleks] gonna go to university because there's Brexit?'. Like 'Yes, sure, she's been here for [multiple] years'. [...] My stepdad was panicking, my mum didn't. Me personally, I felt a bit scared just because I didn't know how things would happen.

Here, despite the significant distress brought on by the referendum, the multiple years Aleksandra's family had lived in the UK is cited as a source of reassurance, demonstrating how the responses to Brexit resulting from this rootedness can be twofold. Whilst Katarzyna and Paulina felt a sense of "defeat" due to their medium-term residence at the time, Aleksandra's more long-term residence seemed to create a heightened sense of fear, due to how much there was to potentially lose, though simultaneously a sense of security from her mother's side. Later describing her "Polish identity" as "just a question mark [...] because I came here when I was young" and stating that she does not have friends in Poland, Aleksandra had not "maintain[ed] transnationally — effectively both 'here' and 'there' — [her] originally home-based relationships and interests" (Vertovec 2001, p. 575). This anchoredness in London seemingly made the prospect of a forced relocation, however unlikely, significantly more stressful.

Wiktoria, who moved to Glasgow as a very young child soon after Poland's EU accession, recalled similar discussions and debates that arose in the family as a consequence of the referendum and the uncertainty created by it:

My parents were quite worried, because in that moment, like, 'What's next?', 'What was everyone going to do?', 'Does that mean we have to leave?'. And so many of the Polish community that we knew just started going 'Yep, that's me going back, because this is just so uncertain'. [...] And it was definitely something that my parents constantly fought about, just leaving, going back, which caused many arguments in our family, just because me and my sister felt so rooted here.

Wiktoria and Aleksandra illustrate how their rootedness and lengthy residence in the UK, having both moved as young children, made the experience of Brexit more stressful for them and their families. Although the risk of having to return to Poland was theoretically the same for them as it was for anyone else, they had both grown up in London and Glasgow respectively, having attended school, made friends, and made plans to study at university there,

whilst life in Poland was more unknown for them. Despite holding only Polish citizenship, both of them culturally identified strongly with Scotland or the UK. As Wiktoria said:

I think if you grew up here as a kid, like when I speak to my friends, sometimes they'll go 'I even forget you're Polish because I just consider you Scottish'. I think Scottish people especially will just say, 'Yeah, you've been here for so long, you're Scottish, no doubt about it'. There's no discussion of 'Oh you were born in this country and you speak in that language'. [...] If I'm put in Poland, I'm always going to Scotland wherever I go. I'm always going to want to come back here at one point.

This seems to confirm the efforts made by the Scottish government to promote Scotland “as a ‘welcoming’ place for immigrants”, something arguably used to emphasise its distinctiveness compared to England (Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2020, p. 7). Similarly, though not in a Scottish context, Aleksandra described her identity as “mixed, like it's UK and it's Polish, because I came here when I was young”. Thus, tied in with the threat of losing friends, changing schools or changing plans for university, Brexit posed the threat of forcing participants to leave a country that formed a substantial part of their identity, to relocate to a country that was in many ways less familiar to them, despite being the one in which they held citizenship. This partly challenges theories of transnationalism that emphasise migrants’ “overlapping membership in political communities”, since neither participant had strong ties in their origin country (Vertovec 2001, p. 575). Their connections to the UK extended beyond the essential aspects of “anchoring”, which may involve the “quest for social and financial stability” for first-generation adult migrants (Franceschelli 2022, p. 773), reaching a point at which they felt at least partially British or Scottish, making the prospect of relocating to Poland particularly stressful. For Katarzyna, Paulina, Aleksandra and Wiktoria, their settled nature in the UK demonstrably contributed to a feeling of stress in the days after the referendum, but since Aleksandra and Wiktoria had grown up in the country, the prospect of being made to leave was seemingly even more concerning.

Those who were less (or not yet) settled in the UK in 2016 expressed much less concern the morning of the result. As Piotr, a recent master's graduate who moved to Glasgow for

university very shortly after the referendum, stated: “I was definitely surprised, potentially a little concerned, but nothing too serious”.

Unsurprisingly, the three dual Polish-British citizens expressed no concerns about their personal situation, instead expressing general concerns about the political situation and their views towards it. The reactions among this group were nonetheless quite diverse. Jakub, who moved to the south of England as a young child and to London as an adult, expressed some minor disappointment, saying he “didn’t see why we needed to leave” but otherwise “wasn’t really much aware of it”, being under voting age at the time. Krzysztof, who moved directly to London as a young child, was of voting age during the referendum and recalled “a million very, very loud arguments” within his family about which way to vote. After the result was announced, he felt “shocked” and “crushed”, stating that he “really cared about that vote”. Monika also moved directly to London as a child. She shared feelings of exclusion, stating “I cried actually, because of the main reasons why people voted”, and the result made her think about her dual identity:

When I saw friends that day, a lot of them were apologising to me which I found very annoying, and I know it came from a good place but I thought ‘I’m British, dude, I don’t know why you’re apologising to me’, and it was a bit of a split identity moment because I’m also Polish so I know why you’re apologising to me, but I’m switching between ‘we messed up’ to ‘you messed up’.

Despite their varying levels of awareness and engagement, it is thus clear how the referendum immediately brought out feelings of anger and disappointment, despite expectedly low anxiety about it.

4.3.2. Medium-term concerns during the Brexit process: A lack thereof

Overall, in the years that followed Brexit, concerns seemed to reduce substantially, and these can generally be explained by education in two main ways. First, participants’ level of education appeared to provide them with the tools to negotiate the complexities of Brexit: some

made clear references to this, especially the disproportionate number of participants with law qualifications. Second, for those enrolled on degree programmes throughout all or parts of the process, their universities provided them with information and resources to help them navigate Brexit.

For all participants, as time passed after the referendum, anxieties seemed to reduce significantly. Paulina stated that, despite the initial “panic” she and her family felt the day after the referendum, once they realised “Oh, there’s a clear easy way of staying”, they “didn’t really worry about it”. Her other Brexit-related anxieties were also low. Asked about any concerns related to her university fees, she responded: “I think my university pretty quickly dispelled any of that”.

Others also indicated that their universities helped, in several ways, to reduce the stress of Brexit. Magdalena, who moved to Glasgow in the years closely following 2016, stated:

At some point, I was wondering whether I would have to pay the fees after Brexit. But the university calmed us down pretty quickly and explained everything, that we won’t have to pay anything and the rules won’t change for the students who are already in the university. So I wasn’t really concerned.

Besides easing concerns about people’s fee status, universities also assisted students with the administrative aspects of Brexit; for example, by sending communications about the EUSS. Further, simply being enrolled in full-time education proved advantageous. Adam, who moved to London with family in the post-accession period, applied for settled status on behalf of all his family members:

I found that for me, it was quite simple, because I was a student, and all I had to prove was that I was in the UK throughout the time periods required. So I just had to contact my university and be like, ‘Hi, can you just make me a letter that I was studying from this year till this year’, and that was that for me. And my sister was also very simple. It was more difficult for my parents because they had to get bank statements or letters from the HMRC, or the council or whatever, that showed continuity that they were in the UK continuously, that they didn’t go anywhere for an extended period of time, and that was a struggle to find evidence.

Compared to his parents, therefore, Adam found the process much more straightforward simply due to having been a student throughout the Brexit period.

Karolina, a lawyer with a master's degree who moved alone to London around five years after EU accession for her university studies, made explicit references to how her profession and level of education helped to reduce the impact of Brexit. When applying for settled status, she said:

I felt that was quite easy, but I guess you know, because I've been employed here it's quite easy for me to show the employment status and stuff like that. And I've lived here for so long, and maybe also being a lawyer probably helped in terms of filling in the forms and stuff like that. That was quite easy for me to follow.

Thus, Karolina was helped not only by the skills gained from being a lawyer, but also by her secure employment, which demonstrably made the process more straightforward. As Kay and Trevena (2019, p. 173) observe, the majority of arrivals from CEE “predominantly filled vacancies in the lower echelons of the labour market”, with migrants from the region being “largely clustered in low-skilled, low-paid employment, often of a rather precarious nature”. They find that this leads to workplace segregation, which affects their ability to progress in the English language and contributes to them being a vulnerable, often isolated workforce. Indeed, Guma and Dafydd-Jones (2019, p. 8) find that among EU migrants in the UK, “[s]pecific vulnerable migrant groups, such as Roma or those who are unemployed, ill, or disabled” were most strongly impacted by Brexit, experiencing both “deep-seated anxieties about being marginalised further or targeted for deportation”, and “uncertain[ty] about whether family members would be able to join them in the future”. Karolina even pointed out the probable discrepancy between her experiences and those of more vulnerable migrants:

I do feel that coming here for university, I already had good English, so in terms of the processes and stuff, it didn't feel as overwhelming. But I can imagine that filling in these forms, and getting the status, and trying to figure out what the impact of Brexit is, maybe if you're not here to do specialised work, and your English is alright but it's not the best, I think that experience would have been very different.

Thus, despite the initially strong concerns among several participants immediately after the referendum, participants' anxieties about their migrant status seemed relatively low overall, particularly in the medium-term. While some received direct support from their universities, Karolina described succinctly how participants' level of education in general helped to make Brexit easier to navigate. This may demonstrate, for example, why Adam applied for settled status on behalf of his whole family. Karolina's observations highlight the disparities between this sample and the more vulnerable groups interviewed, for example, by Guma and Dafydd-Jones (2019). Whilst holding a university degree does not guarantee high-skilled work, the participants in this research are additionally young, speak excellent English, were educated at elite universities, often have master's degrees, and often work in high-skilled professions — characteristics that make 'liquid' patterns of migration more accessible (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020).

4.4. Indicators of transnationalism

This second key section analyses the indicators of transnationalism that appeared during the interviews. Whilst it is necessary to understand participants' emotional responses to Brexit to address the research questions, it is also important to focus on the elements of their narratives which may be indicative of a European identity.

Most participants appeared to engage strongly with a "transnational way of life" (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 129). Some had advanced abilities in more than two languages (all European). Many spoke of friends and family living across Europe and beyond, with whom they maintain regular contact and may visit frequently. Many maintained strong links with Poland, whether through engaging with Polish culture whilst in the UK or through frequent trips to Poland. When considering what being 'European' means to them, the majority cited the ability to travel freely, as well as to live and work in another EU country.

Unexpectedly, the participants most likely to identify as European were those who moved to the UK with family and were more settled and ‘anchored’ in the country. For these participants, the duality of being Polish whilst growing up and living in the UK often served as a gateway to embrace a broader European identity, suggesting that “local contexts and standards” helped fuel “their global ambitions” (Kusek 2015).

Many participants were open to living in other countries in the future, exhibiting a strong preparedness to experience “key life events” whilst “on the move” (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 129). These were mostly those who moved alone and more recently, and who had dynamic and diverse contacts around Europe and the world. Surprisingly, these participants were much less likely to state an identification with Europe.

4.4.1. International networks, travel, and a European identity

Every participant had friends living outside the UK and Poland, and some had family outside either, too. Often, participants made these friendships during Erasmus+ exchanges or other study abroad periods, though their British universities often provided suitably international environments. Some participants, all of whom graduated recently, said they have few or no British friends, and at university found themselves surrounded by students from around Europe and the world, many of whom then moved elsewhere. This later appeared to indicate a low degree of anchoredness to the UK, with these participants often expressing greater flexibility in their future plans. Those who received their primary and secondary education in Poland, before moving to the UK for university, found that by studying the International Baccalaureate programme, which prepared them for university studies outside of Poland, their childhood friends also moved abroad to different countries around Europe and, occasionally, beyond.

Karolina noted that “Erasmus is super popular in Poland”. As a student, she was therefore keen to take part in it herself:

It was something that I was quite aware of, because I guess so many people go on those exchanges back home.

Karolina maintained several friendships from her exchange and travelled occasionally to Spain to visit them. This kind of regular travel, to maintain contact with friends made during Erasmus+ exchanges, was common among participants from all demographics. Natalia moved to the south of England to study and did an Erasmus exchange in France as part of her bachelor's degree, completed a master's degree in Poland, and now works in Glasgow as a lawyer. She expressed how meeting people from not only Europe, but from around the world during her undergraduate Erasmus+ exchange opened up doors for her in terms of travel:

I have a lot of friends from across Europe and the world really, from that French exchange. I genuinely feel like I could go just about anywhere.

Indeed, throughout the interview, Natalia mentioned close friends in almost every continent, though she said she has just “one close British friend”. She also described multiple trips in which she has visited people from various circles.

This kind of experience was common, with many participants traveling regularly to see friends from across Europe and the world. Adam completed an Erasmus+ exchange in Spain, also meeting people “from all over the world”. Similarly, he has maintained contact with the friends he made there, and visits them regularly:

This September, we met up in Berlin, because that's where two of them are currently living, and we are planning another reunion this summer. We are trying to get everyone ready for June, and we wanted to go back to [a city in southern Spain], where we all met up initially. We still have a group chat and we are still very active on that. We update each other on what's happening in our life, we send each other memes.

As Prati, Milite and Cicognani (2021, p. 154) find through a survey with students in Italy, “students who have experienced more relationships and who have been more in contact with people across the world community were also more aware of being interconnected with others and informed about global issues”. They also find that, for the fostering of a European identity, “the experience of mobility abroad is important to the extent that positive interactions with

people from different countries are developed and maintained” (Prati, Milite and Cicognani 2021, p. 154). The question of whether a “highly mobile” “Erasmus generation” forms “a base of support for further European integration” (Wilson 2011, p. 1114), relates more broadly to Rother and Nebe’s (2009, p. 152) identification of a link between intra-EU mobility and “Europeanized” identities. Therefore, one can expect that these Erasmus+ exchanges, if experienced positively, might help to foster a European identity.

However, Adam and Natalia both disagreed with the idea of a European identity, which could imply that these exchanges do not necessarily always foster a deeper connection with ‘Europeanness’. As Natalia stated:

I’ve always felt a bit more cosmopolitan, if that makes sense. I’ve never cared too much for national identities or like, ‘European identity’ or whatnot. [...] I wouldn’t say we have very well-defined ‘European values’ or anything, like we tried to say we do but do we really? I don’t know if I believe in that.

In this sense, Natalia illustrates a general sense of global citizenship — aligning with Prati, Milite and Cicognani’s (2021, p. 154) findings about “contact with people across the world community” and awareness of “global issues” more broadly — but this does not translate into an identification with Europe. In fact, Natalia demonstrates here that she associates the idea of a European identity with “national identities” — which she does not ‘care for’ — loosely aligning with the understanding presented in the literature review (Gellner 1983; Stråth 2002).

Similarly, Adam captured the idea that a European identity may represent an attempt to invent a nation where it “do[es] not exist”, or create an ‘imagined community’ (Gellner 1964, p. 169; Anderson 1983). Unlike Natalia, however, he reasons that it might detract from its member states’ national identities:

‘European’ doesn’t really mean anything to me. It encompasses a lot of things but at the same time it encompasses nothing, because what is it? European countries, European people are just too different. [...] I think it’s a bit synthetic, and it’s using the erasure of our differences.

As Wilson (2011, p. 1136) concludes, “student mobility does not necessarily lead to support for supranational integration”. Indeed, support for European integration is not necessarily the same as a sense of global citizenship and an awareness of “interconnected[ness] with others”, which both participants arguably still demonstrate (Prati, Milite and Cicognani 2021).

Others made diverse friendship groups simply through their universities in the UK, with universities in Glasgow and London in particular providing very international environments. Karolina noted how simply studying at university in London provided her with friends around Europe who she now goes and visits:

I’ve got friends in Germany, in Belgium, in the Netherlands — those are the major ones because quite a lot of my friends who I studied with here in London moved out. There’s another girl who’s in Austria. So yeah, pretty much all over Europe as well.

Thus, even if Karolina had not completed an Erasmus+ exchange, her studies at a self-described ‘global university’ with numerous international students, in a city as diverse as London, provided her with friends who live across Europe with whom she maintains contact. Paulina had the same experience at a different university in London, finding that international students often formed separate groups from British students — a common experience among participants. She linked this to shared experiences and a mutual understanding among international students:

Most of my friends, if not all, were either migrants or exchange students. No one Polish though, because it was just, I think what I found, especially at university, is that migrants tend to speak a similar language in some ways, or have relatable experiences that we sort of bond over.

Unlike Adam and Natalia, however, Karolina and Paulina — who each had long residences in the UK and expressed various indicators of ‘anchoring’, including housing, friends, family, partners and pets — did express an identification with Europe. Indeed, pitting a ‘European identity’ against a British identity, Paulina stated:

I think I have definitely referred to myself as European before, especially if I’m in a migrant circle where there’s people from different countries, and then some British

people, and then ‘the Europeans’ will have maybe a sort of better way of communicating, or a better time with each other than with the British people.

It appears that, for Paulina, her diverse group of friends from across Europe who are all based in London helps to contribute to a sense of European identity, particularly due to shared experiences among these friends that create a distinction from British people. Moreover, she expressed a lack of Polish friends, potentially linking to her stated lack of belonging in Poland.

Perhaps counterintuitively, when assessing the participants overall, a sense of anchoredness to the UK seems to be the most important determinant of identifying as European. All those who overtly identified with Europe have a lengthy residence in the UK and either moved with family or have other strong ties in the country, such as partners or jobs. This seemed to lead to relatively weak ties with Poland, particularly for those who spent most of their childhood in the UK, yet their ties in the UK were rarely linked with a British identity, leaving space for a European identity. As Wiktoria put it, “it’s just a mix of cultures, but I’m a mix of cultures now”.

4.4.2. Engagement with Poland: Counteracting or enhancing European identity?

A number of participants demonstrated attempts to maintain a connection to Poland: through its language and culture, through travelling to the country and, in five cases, through temporarily moving to its major cities as students or for work, primarily to Warsaw. Many of the participants who did so moved to the UK as children and therefore, it seems, attempted to reconnect as adults with the culture of their early childhood. However, for these participants, it appears that reconnecting with Poland provided access primarily to a European identity. In these cases, rather than finding that “global ambitions [were] fueled by local contexts and standards” (Kusek 2015, p. 102), it appears that the revealed lack of familiarity with Poland, combined with the exclusionary effects of Brexit in terms of belonging in the UK, made a European identity something to fall back on.

Jakub, Krzysztof and Wiktoria all moved to the UK as young children very soon after Poland's EU accession. Jakub and Krzysztof currently live in London, whilst Wiktoria has lived for most of her life in Glasgow. All described themselves as simultaneously Polish and "British", "English" or "Scottish"; Jakub and Krzysztof are both dual British-Polish citizens. Jakub and Krzysztof thus chose to engage in study abroad opportunities in Poland: Jakub completed an Erasmus+ exchange as part of his bachelor's degree, and Krzysztof holds a joint master's degree between a Polish university and a British university. This engagement with Poland immersed them in an international environment: their chosen cities attract students from across Europe. Wiktoria studied a bachelor's degree related to Russia and the CEE region, and felt that her integrated study period in Russia "encouraged" her "to explore [her] Slavic roots more", whilst studying Russian as someone who mostly speaks English at home helped her "feel more connected to Polish".

Jakub described how, being immersed in an "international atmosphere" during his Erasmus+ exchange in Poland, he felt "accepted", and "a lot more comfortable than I do in England". The experience also motivated him to learn additional languages:

Even though I had Polish, I felt like, 'Well, I had it as a child', so I'd like to try and learn another one [i.e., English] like these people did, because it's amazing. [...] People would say to me, 'But you've got Polish', but I don't count that because it was literally taught to me at home, but to actually put in the dedication and learn another language, that's a whole other thing.

Jakub's initial desire to engage more with what he called his "Polish side" therefore stimulated a desire to engage more broadly with other cultures and languages. In addition, though Jakub said he already felt "not completely English", his experience studying in Poland also led him to feel "not 100 per cent Polish", partly due to a linguistic generational gap akin to that observed by White and Goodwin (2021, p. 442), whose "second-generation" Polish interviewees in the UK spoke the Polish language of an older generation. In Jakub's words:

When I'm [in England], I don't feel like I get on with English people 100 per cent. But when I was living with [Polish] flatmates, I didn't really connect with them 100 per

cent either, because they were a different generation of Polish people than what I'm used to, because I'm used to my parents and grandparents. There are informal colloquialisms that I don't know from this generation. So I did feel comfortable, but at the same time you're still always like, not 100 per cent Polish. I don't really know what it is like to live there your whole life.

Living in Poland thus made clear to Jakub that whilst he did not feel entirely a part of the UK, he also did not feel immediately at home in Poland, due to being raised almost entirely in the UK. In Jakub's own words, therefore, "I always feel split between two places, so if I combine the two into one, I'd say I'm European".

In a similar vein, for Paulina, a European identity provides something to fall back on as someone who has lived in the UK since her teens but expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of Poland's culture and politics. While preferring the culture of the UK — describing in detail how the country provides "an ease of living" compared to "a heaviness to everyday interaction" in Poland that puts her off returning — Paulina did not feel 'British', describing a 'European identity' as "what's left":

I don't love the word cosmopolitan, but I don't feel particularly rooted anywhere. I don't feel like I belong in Poland, and I don't feel like I necessarily can belong here [in the UK] entirely, so that European identity is kind of what's left.

Thus, those who have lived in the UK for multiple years and who moved with family were more likely to feel comfortable describing themselves as European. Feeling more 'anchored' in the UK, through acquiring "tangible footholds" in the country (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018, p. 253), thus seems to contribute towards a greater sense of European identity.

Karolina, who has a British partner but maintains strong connections in Poland, stated:

I still consider the UK my home. I've lived here for so long, and pretty much my whole adult life. But I do feel European, and I do feel Polish. It's kind of split, I guess.

She thus demonstrates how, despite living in Poland for her whole childhood, living in London for most of her adult life and adapting and settling there has enabled Polish and European identities. Karolina appears to fit the criteria of Rother and Nebe's (2009, p. 152) "'perfect Europeans' who do not experience conflict between [origin country] and [residence country]

identities and who find it easy to develop an ‘interculturated’ European identity layer on the basis of their bi-culturalism”. However, for Paulina and Jakub, that ‘European identity’ is something to fall back on *because* of conflict between these identities, rather than because they “do not experience” it.

4.4.3. Future pathways: Assessing flexibility and inflexibility

Another indicator of transnationalism was participants’ flexibility about future destinations in which to live. When discussing this topic with participants, it was important to identify how realistic these plans were, distinguishing hypothetical aspirations from plans being actively made or realistically considered. This meant differentiating the likes of Katarzyna’s “crazy dream that I would live in some sort of tropical island” from the likes of Piotr’s plan to apply for doctoral programmes in the near future and “focus on the topic rather than the country”.

Whilst the previous section revealed that those more anchored to the UK were more likely to directly express feeling European, they were also — perhaps unsurprisingly — more likely to want to continue living in the UK, often citing communities of friends and family as a key factor for staying. Paulina captured this perfectly when she said:

I really like the UK. I like living here. It just feels like home. [...] And, as much as I’m very happy that I migrated, there is a level of shock when you move to a different country, and I feel like I’m not quite in a place where I want to do that yet. [...] I’m quite happy in the UK, and I’m in no rush to move anywhere else.

Per Grzymała-Kazłowska’s (2018, p. 253) definition of anchoring, she thus illustrates the process of finding oneself “in a new or substantially changed life environment”, thus “searching for footholds [...] to acquire socio-psychological stability and security” in order to “feel ‘settled down’”.

Those who moved more recently, usually for university, were significantly more likely to express flexibility in their future plans. This is likely because they did not have the same attachment to the UK expressed by its more long-term residents. These participants can be

characterised as more closely aligning with life-course theory, as addressed by Klimavičiūtė *et al.* (2020, p. 129), who stress that migration often correlates with major life events:

The life-course approach suggests that migrants remain open and move to maximise opportunities in different places and at different times. [...] Such flexibility [...] can be enabled or limited by geopolitical and economic events like the EU enlargements, financial recessions or Brexit.

Many in this group seemed to view their migration as primarily an opportunity to “maximise opportunities” by moving to the UK to study and gain a degree, but maintaining flexibility in their long-term plans. Indeed, Piotr stated:

If I chose to stay somewhere, I don’t think it would be the UK. I don’t think I want to work in the UK specifically. I’m glad I came here for my studies, because I still liked my studies, and I think [my university] was a good choice. But I don’t particularly think I would like to live in the UK.

He thus seems to view the UK as a beneficial destination to come for university, but not to settle long-term. Later, describing his future plans, Piotr exhibited significant flexibility:

I’m going back to Poland, and I’m gonna live with my sister for a few months. [...] I have to keep traveling back and forth, so for a short time I want to stay in one place where my family and friends are, and then I’m going to look for a job or a PhD, I’m not sure yet at the moment, but I’m going to focus on Europe. But if I find something that is really interesting, and it’s in the UK, then that is also fine, because I’m going to focus on the topic rather than the country, so I’m not saying no to anything.

This seems to very closely reflect the “life-course approach”, with Piotr “maximising” his opportunities with migration by focusing on research topics and choosing where to live according to that. At the same time, he demonstrates an anchoredness to Poland that was maintained by “traveling back and forth” and having friends and family there. By moving to Glasgow purely to study, perhaps he did not feel the need to search in Scotland for “footholds [...] to acquire socio-psychological stability and security” due to maintaining these in Poland (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018, p. 253).

Others similarly cited their career as a reason for maintaining flexibility in their future plans. Natalia, who is in the early stages of her legal career, stated:

I want to go into international law and human rights, so it would genuinely just depend on where I'm sent, I think. Like, where I find a job and then what happens with that. Because I would assume that I can go just about anywhere.

Owing to her unusually diverse network of friends living around the world and prior experiences of living in different countries, contact theory — which holds that “intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice” (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, p. 751) — may provide a partial explanation for her preparedness to relocate anywhere, with factors such as cultural adaptation not causing any concern.

Whether participants changed their future plans after Brexit, and what the implications of this might be, are explored in the following section, alongside other indications of change.

4.5. Indications of change

This third and final key section of analysis investigates how participant's lifestyles, plans, and attitudes might have been affected by Brexit. After analysing the immediate emotional impacts of Brexit, and the general indicators of European identity that were present among participants, it is now possible to assess Brexit's longer-term impact on these indicators. As illustrated in the literature and methodology chapters, Poland's EU accession and Brexit each can be conceptualised as “critical events” in participants' identity formation, since the combined EU membership of the UK and Poland provided a stable period of identity formation that was initiated by the first event and ended by the second (White and Goodwin 2021). Since several years have now passed after the referendum result, and all participants successfully applied for pre-settled or settled status with little stress, interview questions focused on topics such as travel, citizenship, future career aspirations, future destinations of residence, and views among the Polish community, to identify any changes that might have occurred related to participants' European identities.

Overall, some subtle changes related to travel were observed, whether through stricter border security staff, or through the switch from carrying a regular identity document to carrying a passport. Participants also expressed changed perceptions of the UK: several longer term residents felt a reduced sense of belonging that pushed them towards a European identity, and several more recent migrants noted that the country has lost some of its appeal among their Polish peers as a study or work destination. Regarding citizenship and future pathways, a view was apparent among some more recent migrants that settled status provides what is now a unique opportunity to easily access both the UK and EU, especially their job markets. This was described as both “lucky” and an “incredible privilege”, and it complements the finding that more recent migrants, particularly recent graduates, expressed greater flexibility in where they might live, work or complete further education in the future. This, combined with the seemingly greater effects of Brexit on more anchored participants, runs contrary to Klimavičiūtė *et al.*'s (2020, p. 139) findings during the Brexit negotiation process that “the main negative consequence of Brexit feared by [CEE] migrants in the UK” was a “rupture in [the] ‘easy transnationalism’” associated with more liquid patterns of migration. This may be due to the flexibility that was eventually offered under the EUSS to more recent migrants.

4.5.1. Travel

Rother and Nebe (2009) identify a strong relationship between free movement and European identity. Indeed, when participants were asked towards the end of the interviews what it means to be European, the most common answers by far related to travel and “the lack of borders”. As Katarzyna stated, “the first time [she] was like, ‘Wow, I’m European’” was on a trip from the UK to the Netherlands when, at the Dutch border, she passed through easily, whilst her friend, a student from the US, “came back an hour later” after providing fingerprints and answering multiple questions. It is unsurprising that among this selection of young, educated

and highly mobile Polish migrants, Europe is strongly associated with ease of travel, being among those most likely and able to experience this (Rother and Nebe 2009). It indicates that any changes to this because of Brexit would be noticed, potentially affecting their feelings towards the UK — particularly if they identify strongly with Europe and travel is the primary means through which they do. However, participants overall did not observe significant changes in how they travel. Around half noticed no changes “at all”, and the remainder observed only subtle changes. This suggests that, at most, changes to travel reflected a minor interruption to the “easy transnationalism” described by Klimavičiūtė *et al.* (2020, p. 139).

A small number described a stricter atmosphere at the UK border, at least immediately after Brexit. As Karolina noticed:

When the Brexit rules came into force, I did feel like the border control got a bit more chaotic, and definitely more questioning, sort of, ‘What are you doing in the UK?’, and things like that. I think now it’s come back to what it was before, but I think for that period after, when the rules came in for us, it felt that it took longer, there were a lot of additional questions and things like that.

With her sensing that this has since calmed down, the likely effects of these perceived changes can be considered relatively minor. Monika, a dual citizen who has spent most of her life in London, believed this change to be more long-term, and linked it with the government’s hostile rhetoric towards migrants in recent months and years, including the self-styled “‘Stop the Boats’ Bill” and the ongoing “hostile environment” policy (Home Office and Prime Minister’s Office 2023; Taylor and Gentleman 2022). This belief appeared to stem at least partly from her media consumption, which might fuel her exclusion as someone who is very anchored in the UK, yet was still actively planning to emigrate to Germany. She described listening to the news and hearing “how there’s a crackdown on immigration, and the government is celebrating how there’s less and less foreign people”, before she introduced her own experiences post-Brexit:

I did get asked at the border whether I live mostly in the UK or Poland, and I thought ‘What’s it to you? Are you gonna strip me of my passport?’ And I’ve noticed a lot more questioning of people. If I go through the electronic gates it’s fine, but a few times I’ve had to queue for the person, and it just feels a lot more aggressive at the border now.

Monika therefore associates this “crackdown on immigration” with Brexit, and with her own experiences at the border, highlighting Brexit’s exclusionary effects. As Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczołkowska (2020, p. 105) put it, this made it “very clear to some EU citizens that, in spite of their privileged legal position, they also belonged in the category of migrants”.

On one occasion, Aleksandra faced substantial difficulty on a return journey from Denmark to the UK, when she was challenged by border staff and airline staff who were not aware of the rules about traveling with an identity card rather than a passport: most EU citizens are no longer permitted to enter the UK with an identity card, but those with settled or pre-settled status can do so until 31 December 2025 (UK Visas and Immigration *et al.* 2022). She believed that staff “tend to be a bit more aggressive if you have an ID card”.

Wiktoria faced bureaucratic challenges applying for a Russian visa for her study exchange:

I had to prove that I lived in the UK and with a settled status, but there’s no actual official document that is accepted by other countries, I don’t think, that says ‘Yeah, she’s a resident’, because the card that was used beforehand doesn’t work, and I didn’t have one, I didn’t get proper residency until Brexit happened. So I think I spent at least two months beforehand not knowing whether I could go to the country.

This demonstrates another occasion, therefore, in which Brexit brought about further difficulties for participants’ ability to travel freely and easily, including outside the UK and EU — a notable interruption, though perhaps not a “rupture”, in “easy transnationalism” (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 139).

It should, however, be noted that this is quite an extensive list of the travel difficulties faced by participants. Though Brexit induced stressful travel-related experiences for two participants, and others blamed Brexit for a perceived stricter atmosphere at the border, travel was mostly unaffected: around half of the participants answered questions about whether they had noticed changes in travel recently with variations of “not really” or “not at all”. This implies that this particular indicator of a transnational European identity was not greatly affected.

4.5.2. Views towards the UK

More significant changes were observed among participants' broader views towards the UK, which inevitably were expressed across the duration of each interview. Unlike with travel, every participant could list changes to the way they see the UK, their place within it, and their peers' perceptions of it. In this area, the ways in which Brexit marks a permanent "rupture in 'easy transnationalism'" were much more noticeable (Klimavičiūtė 2020, p. 139).

It was common for participants who moved to the UK more recently, particularly those who moved alone, to describe the country as a less appealing destination for their peers to move to. Katarzyna, a lawyer who worked for a firm in Poland after graduating, before recently returning to London, stated:

I just feel like people now look at England as they used to look at United States or Australia, like something out of reach, hard to get in, the visa is hard to get. And master's and university degrees are crazy expensive, so it just puts them off. They will go to any other European destination where they can also get good jobs.

Indeed, she referenced a friend and fellow lawyer who, after graduating from a prestigious British university, took up work in an EU country at an English law firm. She stated:

People are looking at other European countries which offer the same sort of opportunities as the UK, so good jobs, high pay, good companies and international corporations, and you sort of have a safety blanket that if you do it in Luxembourg or Brussels, you don't need a visa, you can just move there and live there, and that's it.

Katarzyna thus implies that the additional administrative processes and costs required for EU citizens to move to the UK simply might not be worth it if similar opportunities exist elsewhere, in European countries where they automatically have the right to live and work. This ties in with her own feeling of 'luck' about having settled status simply due to living in the UK at the right time, which is discussed in-depth in the following section, 4.5.3.

Paweł, who also moved to Glasgow to study, expressed a similar sentiment, stating that after the details of Brexit were confirmed, some of his university peers with EU citizenship left

Scotland after graduating. This indicates that studying in Scotland during the Brexit process led to changes in his peers' views towards the UK:

I think it's changed from the perspective of the fact that they might consider staying there for the rest of their life, because most of them shifted to the thinking of just getting a degree and going somewhere else. Because Brexit affected everything, prices of flats, prices of food, so it's not as great to live here as it was before.

Similarly, Michał — among the most recent participants to come to the UK — believed that “Britain has lost a lot of its external prestige”, both among peers and in online forums. He claimed that:

Honestly, people no longer talk about moving to the UK, that's the biggest thing. When people talk around moving, they either want to move to Warsaw or, you know, Germany, Switzerland, that sort of thing.

It is clear that both Michał and Paweł associate the UK's recent economic downturn, which is attributable to various global and national factors, with Brexit; indeed, food and rent prices have become particularly high, and the UK's annual inflation rate in 2023 was “higher than in most comparable economies”, including Germany, France, and the Eurozone average (Francis-Devine *et al.* 2023, p. 7). With Poland's economy consistently growing above the EU average rate (World Bank 2023a), Michał indicates that its relatively prosperous capital provides ample opportunities encouraging ambitious graduates to stay in the country. Indeed, between 2018–2020, Warsaw's per capita GDP was more than double the national average (Szczygieł 2022, p. 17). Adjusted for purchasing power parity, the city's per capita GDP is by far the highest in CEE (Eurostat 2023).

Nonetheless, those keen on moving abroad for study, career progression, higher salaries or for “lifestyle migration” can far more easily relocate within the EU than move to the UK (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2016). Participants thus described peers who saw migration as a way to “maximise opportunities”, per the life-course approach (Klimavičiūtė *et al.* 2020, p. 129). With the UK seen as “out of reach”, as Katarzyna put it, these are the sorts of “opportunities” that people are likely seek in destinations where it is easier, if available.

Those who had lived in the UK for longer periods of time, however, were expectedly much less likely to be in close contact with peers in Poland and, as discussed, more likely to have sought the “tangible footholds” to feel adapted to and “anchored” in the UK (Grzymała-Każłowska 2018, p. 253). As Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska (2020, p. 105) put it, “after ten or more years migrants may have reached a different stage in their life course and are not as liquid in their plans as they were previously, due to various ties or anchors to the spatial and socio-relational contexts of the country of residence”. As noted, three of these participants had dual citizenship and the remainder all successfully applied for settled status, meaning their legal status in the UK was secure.¹ However, a lasting emotional strain of the Brexit process was apparent during most of these participants’ interviews, leading them to question their position in British society. As Wiktoria, from Glasgow, said:

There’s definitely a feeling that you don’t belong here as much as you did, a feeling of ‘We’re never going to be accepted here’. So it doesn’t matter how hard you work, or how much you learn a language or how much you engage with a culture, you’re never going to be as accepted.

This loss of belonging was particularly upsetting for Wiktoria, since, in her words, “I do consider Scotland my home, like it’s not that I just view myself as Polish, I do very much feel Scottish”. She felt that the rise of “anti-immigration policies [...] in Europe in general” prompted her to question:

What is my place? If I have to be in the country of my origins, is that it? Is that the only place where I can feel at home? It is very strange.

She thus illustrates how the Brexit process made her dual Polish and Scottish identities seem a little less compatible. Further, like other participants, it still prompted her to consider leaving Scotland, but due to her Scottish identity the idea did not seem to sit comfortably with her.

Paulina, from London, similarly felt ostracised from British society. Unlike Wiktoria — who moved to Glasgow as a young child and continues to live there today — Paulina moved

¹ With the exception that settled status is lost after five or more consecutive years outside the UK (UK Government 2023).

to the north of England as a teenager, relocating from one town to another, before eventually moving alone to London and settling there. This perhaps explains why she already felt she doesn't "entirely feel like I belong here", having spent a significant amount of her childhood in Poland, and taking time to settle in one area of the UK. Nonetheless, she credited the experience of Brexit as exacerbating this exclusion:

I grew to be more aware of that small level of alienation. Because you know, if the general majority sentiment in the UK is that migration is something to be reduced, then how can I feel properly British? Not that I would anyway because I didn't grow up here. But I do think probably that moment, and generally the other anti-migration narratives, they do push me more towards feeling more European.

Aleksandra felt similarly, noting how "there was a lot of hate on the Polish community", particularly after the referendum:

There was this Polish community [in London] where you have like a Polish library, Polish theatre, and things like that, [...] and I remember when Brexit came out, somebody came around and sprayed the walls and it was like 'F**k you Polish people', or something like that, and that was just as soon as the Brexit news came out.

Though she noted she did not experience any hatred personally against her, she felt upset by the hatred "towards the community as a whole" that emerged at the time. These experiences illustrate that, though the vulnerabilities of Guma and Dafydd-Jones' (2019, p. 8) participants made their anxieties about further marginalisation more "deep-seated", many of the ostracising aspects of Brexit are more universal. Rzepnikowska (2019) notes the already "well-established" racism and xenophobia experienced by Poles and other "less visible minorities [...] despite their assumed whiteness" (p. 74), finding that Brexit simply "normalised hatred" and made it more visible (p. 65) — as in the scenario above.

Much like Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira's (2020, p. 7) participants, most participants in this study "found themselves in a relatively privileged position at the time of interview (e.g., they were largely employed)". As a result, many "felt relatively secure about their future because their personal circumstances afforded them to do so [...] in stark contrast to, for instance, EU Roma or homeless EU citizens in the United Kingdom". This is likely to explain

the general feeling of a “small level of alienation” that could often be detected, in contrast to Guma and Dafydd-Jones’s (2019) participants in Wales.

Overall, it is evident that those with a longer residence in the UK, who often moved as young children, had developed attachments which came to be threatened, even marginally. Feelings of at least subtle exclusion were evident, and though none shared stories of any comments or acts aimed at them directly, the overall political climate in the country was voiced as being exclusionary. Those who moved more recently expressed how they and their peers simply did not view the UK as the same appealing destination that it once was, and — drawing back to this group’s flexibility when considering onward mobility plans — it appears they formed fewer emotional attachments to Glasgow, London, Scotland or the UK, thus feeling less anchored to the country or to their locality than they perhaps might. The following section considers the implications of these attachments, and lack thereof.

4.5.3. Attitudes towards legal status, citizenship and future pathways

Participants’ views towards their settled or pre-settled status, or their dual citizenship, provided particularly valuable insight into how their identities might have changed in light of Brexit. As noted, all participants today find themselves in a relatively secure position regarding their legal status in the UK, and few encountered difficulties in achieving this. However, several noted how British citizenship or settled status provided them with (or would provide) unique access to both the EU and the UK when deciding on destinations in which to live and work, illustrating a change in how the UK is viewed. Interestingly, it also indicates that the insecurities of Brexit, which one might expect to create a loosening of ties with the UK, in fact strengthen the incentives to formalise the relation to the UK and even become a citizen.

Paweł was among the most recent participants to move to the UK. He decided to continue living in Glasgow after graduating on the basis that he was relatively close to the

number of years of continuous residence required to gain British citizenship, and it would give him more flexibility in the future:

You can get it after 12 months of having settlement status, so it would be great to have because definitely I want to travel a bit, and I might live in another country for a few years and then come back. I don't really know what I want to do in my life. So would it be great to have this because then I will have my privilege of working here without need for visa indefinitely basically.

This view of citizenship as a means to gain greater flexibility may be indicative of a strong transnational outlook. It was common, particularly for those who moved recently to the UK, to express positive attitudes towards acquiring British citizenship despite having relatively weak attachments in the country, with two others actively incorporating this into their plans about where to live in the near future. Counterintuitively, Brexit therefore strengthened the incentive to formalise ties in the UK for participants who were not particularly anchored in the country.

A general theme of “luck” was apparent across many of the interviews. Participants who expressed this sentiment were happy that, by living in the UK at ‘the right time’, they were able to maintain access to both the EU and the UK when deciding on destinations in which to live and work. All three of the dual citizens noted how they were in the unique position of maintaining access to both the UK and EU, providing them with greater flexibility than most. After noting that spending some time studying in Poland helped him to “imagine [him]self living somewhere else”, Krzysztof stated:

Having both citizenships, I feel, gives me a little bit of luck. I don't really have to think about moving everything, like my whole life, to one of these places, because I kind of feel like I can go there or go here any time, which is like a lucky thing that we have now after Brexit.

At the time of interview, Monika was actively making plans to move to Germany in the near future, benefitting substantially from her citizenship since she intends to continue working remotely for the same employer in London.

If I didn't have British citizenship, I would basically find it very difficult to relocate to [a major German city], I wouldn't be able to very easily. So I'm really glad I've got my

dual nationality, and that Polish passport that I thought was worth absolutely nothing, now it's golden.

For both, a change is evident in how they view their dual citizenship, with the changes brought about by Brexit making them value the flexibility it grants them, and demonstrably making them more likely to use this flexibility.

It was also common for participants who moved in more recent years to frame settled status as something they were 'lucky' to have. Since all EU citizens had the right to live and work in the UK before Brexit, this means participants were appreciating a legal status that in fact grants them fewer privileges than they had before. Instead, the 'benefit' offered to participants is that whilst they could maintain flexibility between the UK and EU, nearly all other British and EU citizens no longer enjoy this right. This was strongest in Anna's comment — who moved to Glasgow in more recent years to study — that Brexit has a "positive side":

The process of actually working in UK is more selective. [...] Companies will be more willing to give jobs to people who already have pre-settled or settled status than to them paying for a visa.

Though Anna was the only person to describe any aspect of Brexit as a "positive", others still emphasised this sense of 'luck'. Katarzyna, who moved to London with family as a teenager, though not long before the EU referendum took place, compared her settled status to having citizenship in terms of the flexibility it grants her:

I consider myself incredibly privileged in the situation that I'm in because I have a European passport. So if I ever want to live in any of the EU countries, I can just move there and live there, no problem. But at the same time, I have the status in England, so I can live here no problem. I can enter here and I can be here almost like a citizen. [...] I can live in England with the same passport and I can go and live everywhere in Europe where I want with the same passport. And I just only need one.

This theme of luck is indicative of a view across more the recent migrants that — regardless of the UK's "external prestige" mentioned by Michał — maintaining access to the country's job market, educational institutions, and more is still valued highly.

The major exception to this theme of ‘luck’ was those who moved as young children and didn’t have dual citizenship. Indeed, though he found the process of applying for settled status straightforward, Adam did not feel ‘lucky’ due to having Polish citizenship and settled status. Rather, he expressed minor frustration that he needed to apply in the first place:

It felt a bit ‘extra’ because I have been living in this country for so long and that was never required, and now suddenly I have to submit this document that says that I’ve been doing this for so many years, it just felt a bit redundant.

This relates to Adam’s plans to stay in the UK, referring to his friends and family in London as the primary factor for wanting to do so. Regarding British citizenship, Paulina expressed a similar sentiment, stating that she would not apply since it would not “give me anything other than the ability to vote”, indicating minimal political engagement combined with otherwise strong attachments:

Because I’m quite settled in the UK, and I feel like this is much more home than Poland is by far, I have this feeling that, because I feel like I belong here, I don’t really feel like begging to be accepted. I don’t feel like that’s appropriate really, because I went to university here, I live here, I earn money here. Paying money and doing tests and stuff like that just feels a bit demeaning.

Thus, because Paulina and Adam have both developed a sense of attachment to London and the UK, they didn’t express a sense of “luck”. Paulina’s feeling that applying for citizenship meant “begging to be accepted” illustrates that, for her, citizenship is strongly associated with identity. It thus demonstrates a preference to continue being Polish, but to call the UK home, perhaps explaining her comfort in identifying as ‘European’, particularly when, in her words, “there are many people in this country who would rather see me gone”.

This change was captured well by Katarzyna, who noted how the change in legal status affected her European identity:

When I moved to England, I felt like I live here because of European Union. So like, I know that I can live here because England belongs to European Union, and I’m a European Union citizen, I’m Polish so I can be here. And after Brexit, I sort of feel like I can live in England because I’ve lived here for five years before I could apply for settled status. And right now, my safety blanket is any other European country. So it

changed because I live in England, but I feel like it's not any more because I'm an EU citizen, it's because I'm just [Katarzyna], who was lucky.

The duration of time spent in the UK seems to be the primary factor determining participants' views towards the EUSS, with those who moved to the country more recently being more likely to view settled status as a positive. Participants more anchored to the UK (and their localities) were more likely to express frustration about their new legal status or notice the changes to it, perhaps because they additionally felt that their overall sense of belonging in the country they called home had come under threat. The exception was dual citizens, who were more prepared to explore other options outside of the UK, viewing their dual citizenship as an advantage and feeling closely tied to both countries.

Whilst the “ongoing process of [...] unsettling” observed by Guma and Dafydd-Jones (2019, p. 1) does not seem to be as strong here, more anchored participants illustrated how their sense of belonging in British society was nonetheless impacted by the referendum, since it continues to be understood as a vote against immigration — an understanding that is exacerbated by the government's ongoing anti-immigration rhetoric (Home Office and Prime Minister's Office 2023; Taylor and Gentleman 2022). As Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira (2020, p. 7) note, relatively privileged EU migrants — in this instance university graduates — are more likely to feel “secure about their future because their personal circumstances [afford] them to do so”. This likely explains the relatively minor impacts that could be detected by the Brexit process, and the fact that a theme of “luck” and “privilege” emerged among the dual citizens and more recent migrants regarding job market access and flexibility of residence.

This goes some way towards explaining why participants more settled in the country were likely to feel comfortable with describing themselves as ‘European’ — having spent most of their lives outside of Poland, but finding that Brexit “disrupted [the] open-ended process of belonging”, or anchoring, within British society (Guma and Dafydd-Jones 2019, p. 8). On the other hand, participants who moved to the UK more recently (who in some cases moved from

Poland to the UK, then moved to one or two other countries, and later returned to the UK) seemed to be more 'liquid' in their approaches, abiding by the principles of life-course theory. As Klimavičiūtė *et al.* (2020, p. 129) note, migration, particularly in youth, often “correlates with major life events”, including university studies. Thus, this group of participants were more likely to see settled status and, potentially, citizenship as advantageous opportunities, rather than ruptures in their sense of belonging that led them to rethink their affiliations and identity.

5. Conclusion

Following the EU's eastern enlargements in 2004 and 2007, much of the literature enthusiastically foresaw complete transformations in the nature of intra-EU migration, going so far as to redefine post-2004 A8 migrants as simply “*not* immigrants” (Engbersen and Snel 2013; Favell 2008, p. 703). This was perhaps overzealous: a significant number of those exercising their free movement rights to relocate to the UK faced social and economic obstacles inhibiting frequent relocation (Kay and Trevena 2019). Additionally, the process of adjusting to new environments can be psychologically taxing, and people are likely to invest time into forming social connections and establishing other crucial footholds in order to initiate this process and achieve stability and security (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018).

Several participants in this study demonstrated that liquidity is nonetheless accessible for certain demographics, particularly young, highly educated and highly qualified migrants with advanced language skills who lack strong family obligations. Primarily, participants who moved more recently, to study, were likely to exhibit flexibility in their future endeavours and display relatively little concern about the legal changes associated with Brexit. Still, this does not confirm the generalised nature of much early literature foreseeing a post-enlargement era of migration defined by liquidity: in fact, strong attachments to Poland were clearer among this demographic, implying that their transnationalism was supported by maintaining an ‘anchoredness’ in their origin country. This supports Kusek’s (2015, p. 102) claim that “global ambitions can be fueled by local contexts and standards”. Participants who moved at a young age, and with family, were more likely to want to continue living in the UK and not realistically consider alternatives, citing factors such as the number of years they had already lived in the country and their friends and families living there, demonstrating a greater sense of anchoredness through the development of tangible footholds in their localities of Glasgow and London.

Frequent travel around Europe and engaging in studies abroad were also understood as indicators of a transnational European identity, particularly maintaining friendships through these experiences; however, these were present among all participants, whose demographic (young, educated, and relatively financially secure) can more easily access these experiences (Prati, Cicognani and Mazzoni 2019; Rother and Nebe 2009). Interestingly, however, this did not guarantee a stated identification with Europe, suggesting that travel and relocation around Europe are not reliable indicators of a European identity. Though it may appear counterintuitive, those who seemed more ‘anchored’ in the UK were more likely to identify as European than those less attached to the country. This counteracts the expectation, drawn from the literature, that moving without family would enable greater liquidity thus a stronger European identity. In part, this appeared to be because they underwent a stable period of identity formation in which they developed attachments in the UK, and their Polish citizenship automatically granted them this right (see Figure 1); this meant a secure ‘Pole in UK’ identity could develop without the need for British citizenship or complex administrative processes, and there was little conflict between a Polish identity and a long-term UK residence. Once EU citizenship ceased to automatically provide this right and a referendum perceived as a mandate against immigration had taken place — but a substantial degree of detaching from Poland and Polish life had occurred — some participants could ‘fall back’ on the idea of being European. As Paulina stated, “I don’t feel like I belong in Poland, and I don’t feel like I necessarily can belong here entirely, so that European identity is kind of what’s left”.

5.1. Avenues for future research

As EU citizens continue to navigate life in a decidedly post-EU Britain, the topics of their belonging and identity are valuable areas for ongoing research — particularly as its government continues to adopt hostile rhetoric and policies towards migrants, especially those who are

more vulnerable and less likely to find secure and high-paid work (Home Office and UKVI 2022; UKICE 2023). The results of this study are heavily shaped by the sample's demographic of young university graduates, and they are likely to differ among less secure EU migrants and post-referendum/post-Brexit returnees, as well as migrants living in comparably remote and less ethnically and culturally diverse areas of the UK (Guma and Dafydd-Jones 2019). It would be beneficial to conduct further studies on how these more vulnerable groups view their relationship to and affiliation with Europe today, and to draw comparisons with EU citizens who engaged in return or onward migration after 2016. In addition, the literature may benefit from quantitative studies testing the hypothesis induced from these in-depth interviews that EU citizens who are more 'anchored' to the UK are more likely to feel European due to Brexit, because this may have implications for political engagement, civic unity, and other aspects of belonging.

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Appendix 1. Interview guide

Section 1: Mobility and migration (*incl. warmup and rapport building*)

- Introductory questions, including:
 - How long have you lived in London/Glasgow? Have you lived anywhere else in the UK?
 - Where did you study? What did you study? How was the experience?
 - What led to you to move to the UK?
- Do you travel to Poland often? (And why? Professional/personal reasons?)
- Has your experience of travel between the UK and Poland, or elsewhere, changed since 2016 or 2021?
- Do you have social connections in any other EU countries? What are they? Do you travel there often?
- How has your experience of living the UK/Scotland/London/Glasgow compared to your expectations before you arrived?

Section 2: Citizenship and legal status

- (How) has Brexit affected your legal status in the UK?
- Did you apply for the EUSS? Can you tell me about your experience of this? What was the process like? Did you face any difficulties?
- Have you considered applying for British citizenship? Why/why not? Can you describe your experience of the process (if yes)?
- Did Brexit cause any stress/uncertainty about your university fee status in the UK?

Section 3: Feelings and aspirations

- How did you feel when you first heard the result of the EU referendum in 2016?
- Do you see yourself living in the UK long-term, or do you have plans to move elsewhere? What are your future plans in terms of where you live? Has Brexit changed these?
- How do you envision the impact of Brexit on your future career aspirations?
- Have you noticed any changes in the Polish community in the UK since 2016 and since 2021? How about for other European friends in the UK (if you have any)?
- In your opinion, what does it mean to be European?
- Do you think people in the UK/Scotland and Poland have the same understanding of what Europe is?

Appendix 2. University of Glasgow ethical approval



Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

College of Social
Sciences

Notification of Ethics Application Outcome – UG and PGT Student Applications

Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application

Application Number: PGT/SPS/2023/012/IMCEERES

Applicant's Name: Toby Berrett

Project Title: Assessing the impact of Brexit on the transnational European identities of Polish university graduates living in London and Scotland

Application Status: Fully Approved

Date of Review: 20/02/2023

Start Date of Approval 20/02/2023 End Date of Approval 28/08/2023

NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.

Recommendations (where changes are required)

Where changes are required by reviewers all applicants must respond in the relevant boxes to the recommendations of the Committee and provide this as the Resubmission Document to explain the changes you have made to the application as well as amending the documents. **Changes to the application form or supporting documents should be highlighted either in block highlight or in red coloured text to assist the reviewers.**

All resubmitted application documents should then be provided.

Approval Subject to Amendments means that the applicant can proceed with data collection with effect from the date of approval, but amendments must be fulfilled.

Amendments Subject to SEF should be submitted to ethics administrator.

If your application is rejected a new application must be submitted to the ethics administrator. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document provided as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated.

REVIEWER MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

APPLICANT RESPONSE

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REVIEWER MINOR RECOMMENDATIONS

APPLICANT RESPONSE

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Appendix 3. Jagiellonian University ethical approval

Ethics in Research Commission
Institute of European Studies
Jagiellonian University in Kraków



Kraków, 24th April 2023

APPROVAL DECISION

for the project

Assessing the impact of Brexit on the transnational European identities of Polish university graduates living in London and Scotland

The Ethics in Research Commission of the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, having assessed the scope and consequences of research undertaken within the project *Assessing the impact of Brexit on the transnational European identities of Polish university graduates living in London and Scotland* submitted by Mr. Toby Berrett, hereby declares that the project meets the standards of ethical research as adopted by the Institute of European Studies.

The Commission finds that the applicant have considered thoroughly the ethical dilemmas that may be involved in their research and safeguarded adequate protection of all potential participants as well as their personal data.

Members of the Commission:

Dr. hab. Jacek Kołodziej, prof. UJ (Chair)

Dr. Ewa Kamarad

Dr. Joanna Orzechowska-Waślawska

Dr. Przemysław Tacik

On behalf of the Commission,

Dr. Przemysław Tacik

Secretary of the Commission

